

THE MOON OVER THE ATLANTIC

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For Laura, pallor and radiance

Preface:

THE SPHENOID FRACTURE

"The matter of the world was a god called Chaos."

Thomas Hobbes

"The Sphenoid Fracture" is a diptych consisting of the novels "The Moon over the Atlantic" and "The Bats of Brazil." It tells the story of several characters over four decades, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in a geographical space consisting of the province of Buenos Aires and the Argentine coast. However, these stories have projections into previous times, as well as to other geographies in Europe and America.

Each of these narratives has a self-contained plot, and can be read independently. However, several elements connect the novels, including characters, events, and common places. And the main common factor, however, that attempts to unite them comprehensively does not represent a thematic axis, but rather a primordial causal factor, of an uncertain nature and therefore more capable of accepting multiple derivations and consequences.

In science, it is considered that all the multiple specifications or specializations of biological systems derive from primordial cells, or stem cells. The primordial factor in these novels is not their absolute

protagonist, but rather the background scenario that appears from time to time, silent and misty. Sometimes it serves as an explanation for episodes and events, other times it tends to add complexity, but it always serves the function of representing a point of reference, a known place or cause in which the reader—more than the characters themselves, who will never be aware of this common factor, but rather their mere instruments—will find a supposed internal logic that lends its own plausibility to the grand plot.

This plausibility should not be confused with what is usually called pure reason, nor even the much-touted common sense. The logic of the plot will be its own, because even madness has a logic of its own. The reader must resort to this, perhaps incorporating that logic into their own world, or more appropriately, incorporating themselves into the logic of the narrated world.

This primordial factor is a fracture. As such, it constitutes a solution of continuity on a previously untouched surface. Where before there was no space, now there is. And that space must be filled, because physics, and its great predecessor, metaphysics—and we pay tribute to Pascal in particular—tells us that nature abhors a vacuum. Is nature a thinking entity, or is it at least shaped by pure intuition? Or, going even further down the scale of complexity, is it absolutely automatistic? If we speak of automatism, we speak of reflexes, and we will enter into the matter of the purely organic. Therefore, in a fracture, which in this case occurs in a bone, the open space tends to fill with the surrounding elements, perhaps blood, perhaps air. A space that shouldn't exist, and that is occupied by elements that shouldn't be there, will necessarily create disturbances. These disturbances will be what in medicine are called signs, that is, physical evidence that can be demonstrated with any natural or artificial sensory system, be it our eyes, ears, hands, or any artificial device capable of determining their presence. But these disturbances will also provoke purely subjective sensations in the subject where they occur, and then we call them symptoms, much more than signs, are susceptible to multiple interpretations. The subject's ability to tolerate pain, previous experiences, intellectual levels, psychological and emotional characteristics—all of these will influence both the intensity of such symptoms and the likelihood of their presence or manifestation. Over time, human beings have grown accustomed to simplifying the complexity and constant contradictions of the factors that surround them, reducing them to certain ideas that become entrenched in the collective psyche and form the set of common traditions, what we call culture.

These simplifications, from their status as concrete and satisfactorily explanatory ideas for certain phenomena, tend to rise to a more abstract level, thus serving as cultural palliatives—because culture is also a great curative, perhaps the most important one created by man—for human behavior, natural events, or simply for anything that lacks a specific reason. These ideas take on the status of symbols.

Then, from their merely physical condition as indefectibly demonstrated signs, they become susceptible symptoms. s to doubt, and then to the value of symbols. Already with this name, they will be more general and comprehensive, also susceptible to multiple doubts, but these now depend

only on the different cultural points of view that arise from organic conditions: variations in diet, forms of courtship, or diverse commercial values. But the symbol is above all these preconditions, much higher on the level of purely everyday factors, and much more distant in time, so much so that collective memory has already lost the exact notion of its origin. Once they reach this level, they can take the name of myths, depending on the culture we are talking about.

Therefore, the more remote their place in time, the less verifiable, and therefore more probable. And in this way, it will be impossible to overthrow them with any particular notion. Only science applied and apprehended in the collective psyche has overthrown some, but symbols—or myths—tend to be reborn, because they have no body and cannot be destroyed. These are ideas that acquire such power that they remain forever latent. They are like ghosts, or, if you will, like holographic images. They are and are not where we see them. Or we imagine them where we want to see them. And they are there because we see them.

The ultimate symbol is, surely, the idea of divinity. We are no longer in the realm of the physical, of flesh and bones. We are at the level of metaphysics. God is the highest exponent of human culture; not the best or most sublime, simply the ultimate power of the symbol. And the symbol can be plundered, it can be denied again and again, even the absolute nonexistence of what it represents can be proven, but it cannot be definitively overthrown.

The origin of the symbol is, as we saw, organic, and various religions have attempted to bring the idea down to the level of the flesh. God descends to earth as man, suffers lacerations, bleeds, and his bones are also broken. Man, however, abhors a vacuum like nature. The body dies and degrades. Where there was something, there is nothing. That nothingness must be filled. And when there is nothing to fill that nothingness, imagination appears, which was always there, which created the symbol and was perfected with it.

The symbol, therefore, is the bridge between the physical organic and metaphysical ideas.

The sphenoid bone is a strange bone. It is located almost in the center of the human skull, forming a large part of the base. It constitutes the posterior walls of the orbits, and through its narrow main orifice, the optic nerve and the blood vessels that supply it pass. Its shape is very peculiar: isolated in an anatomical specimen, it appears to have the shape of a bird with outstretched wings.

These peculiarities predispose it to a wide variety of neurological pathologies, manifested in verifiable signs. But if we talk about symptoms, these are more confusing and complex. There will be primarily optical manifestations. Illusions for the most part, hallucinations most likely, and also blindness, which can be another form of hallucination. Can't seeing nothing, or seeing darkness, also be a result of subjectivity? If what we see is different from what is in front of us, they will call us stupid. If we see what is not in front of us, they will call us crazy.

Those who see God, ultimately the ultimate symbol created by man, through a fracture at the base of the skull, what will they be called?

That is the question the characters in these novels will never be able to ask themselves because they are so immersed in the situation that defines them that they cannot see beyond their own interior.

The sphenoid fracture extrapolates pain, anguish, existential bitterness, and perhaps even the incomprehensible inconsequence of life, to the outside. And once there, the duration of this image, symbol, or representation, whatever you want to call it, is so ephemeral, so absurd, that it must return to its origin, at the risk of becoming a caricature of an obsession, and surely to exterminate itself. The body will die, and only the bones may last a little longer. And during all that extra time granted to the poor substance of lime, the fracture will continue to be seen, and even felt, like a latent space where there is really nothing left.

Bautista Beltrame

"Buenos Aires Radar"

*"The tall wolf whose fate is to knock down the moon
and kill it."*

*"That moon of scorn and scarlet that is
perhaps the mirror of anger."*

JORGE LUIS BORGES

MAXIMILIAN AFTER LOSING GOD

1

Perhaps I could even see the moon in broad daylight, Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne thought to himself, as he contemplated the immense waves of light moving across the ocean, gliding over the waters,

surrounding the ship like ghosts or evil and perverse spirits disguising themselves as light to deceive men. The light blinds the weak sight of mere human beings, and the sea, so vast, harbors in its depths the evil and perverse minds of the demons expelled from paradise. Who could say that Lucifer, after being expelled by God, did not fall into the water, since it predominates over the surface of the planet? A demon who has sunk, creating a hell in the sea. Fire bursting forth from the waters: this is Satan's miracle, for he too once claimed to be God, and now he is the god of his domains, the god of the infernal waters.

And over them now sailed the ship carrying Maximilian and three hundred others, traveling to a land where they hoped to find a better future, a more attainable hope than the one with which they had been born and which had been fading since their coming into the world. Over the waters that cover the specters of hell, like the miracle of Jesus walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

"Someday," he murmured in a low voice, "I will baptize a son with the name Jesus."

Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne was twenty-two years old and still single. When he wore the cassock of a seminarian in Cádiz, the thought of marrying or fathering children was far from his mind. Every morning, an hour before dawn, he would rise from the thin mattress in his cell, which had no furniture except the narrow bed, and wash himself in the porcelain basin resting on the floor. Afterward, kneeling naked, he would flog his back with the whip his uncle had given him upon entering the seminary as an insult, a degradation, and a humiliation. He accepted it just as he had accepted the rules of the order until then: pain as a symbol of reparation, an anesthetization of sin, and the elimination of all pain and pleasure. Then, shortly before dawn, he would continue praying on his knees, feeling the blood on the old scars from the previous night, the smell of blood, and the aroma of the urine he couldn't help but spill while flagellating himself. Two nauseating liquids that had to be eliminated from his body so that it would be as pure as that of Jesus Christ on the cross. I could see the moon in broad daylight, he kept telling himself, ecstatically watching the western trade winds peeking into the summer they had been slowly approaching for thirty days. The ship, like the vessel of Acheron, moving away from the harsh European winter to approach and shudder in the extreme warmth of another continent, a hemisphere that could very well resemble the same hell that old ship had also tried to approach, sinking into the abyss, burning or freezing, which in the end is the same thing, because a soul in pain is a frozen soul; ice burns and withers and transforms into an immense yet tiny, shrunken, dead spider, where ants and flies will feed like rabid dogs, hungry lions, or cynical hyenas with the smile of Judas on their faces. "I'm afraid," Maximilian murmured, looking at the waves crashing against the ship's hull, the metal of a vessel built a year earlier, in 1909, but already decrepit from the vagaries of time and the force of watery space, the foam like the tool of an evil goldsmith who abhorred even the small freedom man took to travel, as if it weren't his right, as if there were roots that tied man to the earth, after having abandoned water at the beginning of time. Water was, perhaps, a resentful being, or a series of demons or creatures that

engender ungrateful and wayward children, attracted by the flavor and richness of the earth. And the bridges and ships were the apotheosis of revenge, the ultimate synthesis of opportunity for those water mothers, those aquatic fathers engendered, perhaps, by Lucifer himself. Thus, then, was the way heaven, water, and earth interlock, related like the same indissoluble bonds between parents and children. Blood could be air, water, or dust, but it was all the same substance transformed, mixed, forming the clay that the same elements molded to form a doll so fragile it has lasted ten million years. Man as God's counterpart, the creature created as the fruit of the hatred between heaven and earth.

In the middle, water.

The transition, the passage, the transformation.

The journey.

As he continued with his hands clutching the deck railing, his body rocked by the swaying of the ship, his pelvis like a hinge whose moving leaf was his torso, held up only by his arms resting on the railing, his head oscillating like the lens of an old-fashioned telescope at the end of the short, oil-lubricated arm. Trying to see, to locate the moon in broad daylight. Why so much effort, he asked himself, for the simple reason, he quickly answered, that he hadn't been able to see it the night before. Every night since he had set sail, he searched for the moon, sometimes running desperately along the decks, jumping over passengers sleeping outdoors, those traveling for free or paid for by the state, those who were sick and coughing or expectorating blood or fluids who each morning were swept and washed with countless buckets of cold water and a disinfectant that left its mark for exactly twelve hours, when it was night's turn to arrive and vomit up the incorruptible remains of the day's feasts and misfortunes. The hundreds of lives, with their many variables, that were those three hundred or so people, like a sampler that God had prepared for his street sale, that is, his intercontinental tour. A continent dominated, an old continent acquired, now another one was left to conquer. And the samples were people, their minds, arms, and legs. Work, ideas, and reproduction. The triad that Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne discovered one day in Cádiz, before taking off his cassock forever. The triad that replaced the triptych of Catholicism.

Running along the deck, he searched for the moon every night until he found it whole or in pieces. Sometimes barely visible, but knowing that its shadow was there. The shadow of the moon, its hidden side, its always hidden face, as if some deformity made it ashamed, or if there were things on that side of its surface that were clearer than on the visible side, objects or beings that it was ashamed to show or hid like someone reserving weapons for an upcoming war.

Who could interpret it? he wondered, contemplating the white cloud of the moon in broad daylight, under the blazing sun, amid waves of light reflected by the waves of the sea, which also contributed their roar so that the two seas, that of light and that of water, were twin brothers who rarely met. Sporadic moments that could only be contemplated on the high seas,

where they, more than three hundred people, stood still as if suspended in time, absent from real space and from countable time. Floating adrift as if traveling in the air. Surrounded by the ethereal substances that formed them at the beginning of time.

Maximilian wondered why they didn't notice all this. Why didn't they see the moonlight beneath the splendid breath and the nauseating aroma that the sun awakened in the dead flesh, the dirty skins, and the wood weary of salt and blood. What was the reason that, having eyes, they didn't see the hands of the moon throwing their bones into the sea, because that was the cause of the waves? Not the wind, nor the ocean currents, nor even the demons of the depths, themselves eager for the fresh bones the moon threw up each day, hidden behind the sun's rays. Bones that at night would illuminate to feed them and revive them.

He had dreamed of the rain of bones for some time before, and since then he had searched for the moon every night. More precisely, since he tore off his cassock as if it burned him, one March evening in Cádiz, on the street where the convent and seminary stood. But he didn't want to think about this for now, and the heat on his head felt good, the light like heat warming his white linen shirt, wrinkled, with loose buttons and others broken, revealing the width of his chest, barely hirsute, barely even wide, whiter than his dirty shirt. He felt his old leather pants bothering him, making his legs and groin sweat. He wanted to take off his clothes once and for all and dive into the water for a long time. Swim alongside the boat like he'd seen the fish do throughout the voyage.

Then he felt a tug, then a sting in his hip. He flinched less from the sting than from being awakened from his aquatic reveries, his life as a metamorphosed fish in search of demons hidden in the depths of the sea. He, a sea angel recruiting legions against evil. But what had stung him was nothing more than the long, broken fingernail of one of the nearly 150 children on board. He was dressed in rags, barefoot, and his long hair was dirty and sticky. He smelled of the sea and fresh fish. Yet his smile was one of enviable virginity, of a naïveté of wise ignorance. Yes, Maximilian said to himself, I will baptize one of my children with the name Jesus. He would have liked to be the Messiah. He used to gather children around him to talk to them about the kingdom of heaven. He turned and stroked the boy's head.

"What's your name?" he asked the boy.

The boy didn't answer. He frowned and half-closed his eyelids. The sun shone directly on him, and all he could see was a yellowish-reddish halo surrounding the man he'd called. And in the midst of that reflection, a black breath, a dark thread with a faint, nauseating aroma. But the aroma of old, dried, rotten fish on the deck was so strong that any other scent, even that of a long-dead human body, could easily be missed.

Maximilian thought of the corpses that had been thrown into the ocean since the beginning of the epidemic. Typhus, the ship's doctor had declared. Since then, the sick had been locked in a section of the stern, behind barricades of barrels watched by guards day and night. In the

mornings, the doctor and a couple of assistants made their rounds, wearing gloves and masks, beating the bodies lying on the deck with sticks. Anyone who didn't move had their pulse checked, and without ceremony or shroud, they were thrown into the sea. Maximilian hadn't wanted to enter the restricted area, and even if he had, he would have been forbidden. Only the doctor or the guards entered. From a distance of ten meters, he could see the kitchen assistants carrying buckets of food for the sick. They left them at the barricades, and those still walking were responsible for distributing them to the others.

The captain had said help would arrive, but the ship was declared under quarantine, and it would still be more than a month before any other ship could approach and pick up passengers. No one had said what Maximilian already imagined: that they wouldn't be able to enter any port until the quarantine was lifted. Because of this, the engines had reduced their power, and the ship was sailing more slowly. And although the radiant sun promised a calm summer on the high seas, the risks of storms and shipwrecks were no small concern for the crew. He saw them checking the lifeboats, some of them made of rotten wood, repaired slowly and reluctantly because there weren't enough tools. Somehow, the more time passed, or when storm clouds threatened the spirits of everyone except those cloistered on the lower decks or in their private cabins, the desire to see more dead people dawn represented a form of relief, a peace of mind for the future. The fewer people, the greater the chance of survival for the rest in the event of a shipwreck. This is how, he told himself, as he watched the dying coming and going behind the barrels, man condemns others for the sake of his peace of mind. If God is in charge of fulfilling his wishes and hopes, man should have no more work than reaping the fruits of such condescension. But is God ever as appropriately practical as on these occasions? And his answer was positive: God's practicality is utilitarian, like a steam engine advancing endlessly toward an impossible goal: nothingness and infinity.

"What's your name?" he asked the boy again, who lowered his gaze, rubbed his eyes, and pointed toward the ship's exiles.

Maximilian realized he had escaped, and now that he discovered he had touched him, and could almost feel his breath on the palm of his hand, he looked toward the stern, at the sick people covered in blankets that hid their ragged and dirty clothes, their haggard faces, their shame, and the shame that forced them to defecate or urinate by the railing. The outer surface of the hull stank of old or fresh excrement, and when the wind blew from there, the smell became unbearable throughout the ship. The captain's order had been strict: the sick were not to leave the forbidden area or use the same drainage system as the rest of the passengers. He had never encountered such a situation, but he had heard his uncle, a merchant seaman, speak of certain things that should be done in such situations. However, these were stories from his childhood, and his uncle had not treated him like a child for a long time. Seriousness and duty had taken root in his firm face, in his tall body, in the manner with which he treated his only nephew. And as a final gift and sign of contempt for the fate he had decided for himself: the whip, and the words that accompanied it.

Remembering those words, Maximilian grabbed the boy's hand and said:

"Let's go."

They walked together to the barricade. One of the guards barred their way, looking down at the boy and frowning.

"The boy has escaped; he must return to his family," said Maximilian.

The guard hit the boy's chest with his weapon, without knocking him off his feet, and then kicked him so he could pass between the barrels.

Maximiliano grabbed the guard by the clothes.

"I have to go too! "Come in!" he shouted.

The guards tried to calm him down with blows, and when he was sitting on the ground with his face purple and his body stiff, surrounded by onlookers, he took off his shirt and pants. The women turned away, the men laughed, but soon all joking passed, like the wind that carries the warm aroma of a freshly prepared meal or the fleeting scent of wildflowers. He showed the wound the boy had made on his hip, larger than he had imagined, because until then he had only felt the burning of the scratch, soothed by the warm freshness of his blood.

The guards then began to push him with their boots beyond the barrels, picked up his clothes, and threw them into the water. Maximilian remained lying on the deck, next to the boy kneeling beside him, resting his small hands on the man's chest. He felt the boy looking at him, at him, a man who a short time before had sincerely believed he had heard the voice of God and had been chosen as one of his disciples. But the boy's hands were more warm and sincere than God's own. He understood this at this moment when he thought his end was near, watching men and women approaching slowly, appearing at the edges of his vision as if he were half-submerged in a lake, being baptized, perhaps, by numerous hands forming shadows before the blazing sun. Some brought clothes, others blankets, others a bowl of fresh water. His face was cleaned by hands that must have been a woman's, and when the blood diluted and disappeared from his eyes, he saw the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Are you the Virgin?" he heard himself say.

A chorus of muffled laughter ran through the crowd surrounding him. He saw how modesty flushed the until-a-moment pale face of the girl who had washed him. He felt those same hands gently scrub the rest of his body, while a scent of mallows, suddenly appearing in the middle of the sea, carried by seagulls that didn't exist at that distance, perhaps inhabiting a merciful wind, an ancient wind that has chosen to offer rather than drag or overthrow. And in that scent of mallows, an entire city arrived, an entire world that Maximilian had thought abandoned in the confines of his merciless memory, which, in combat with bitter and ancient oblivion, had lost a battle, but was now recovering, growing, extending the vast terrain of memory and pain.

When he entered the seminary, his uncle José was waiting for him at the door. Maximilian saw him standing there as he approached along the sidewalk, carrying the suitcase containing his few belongings, the only ones the Order authorized him to bring from home: documents, a few family mementos, the Bible. Everything else was superfluous and replaceable: clothes, toiletries, and the rest, photos, ornaments, even rings, objects of greed. He would enter with his body and the clothing necessary to cover his bodily shame. This was what he was thinking as he continued on his way under the sun that illuminated that Cádiz street where the convent opened and closed its doors once a year for the new seminarians. Uncle José saw him arrive, but he didn't raise his eyes to the face of the old sailor who had raised him since he was five, since his parents had died. Parents was just a word, photos he had pasted on the wall of his room in his uncle's mansion, but which he had never kissed as the old man hoped he would one day after saying his bedtime prayers. Kneeling beside the bed, the little boy Maximiliano, as the maids called him, had glanced sideways at the upright, stern figure of Uncle José, with his boots and uniform, his cap tucked under his arm, his gaze stern behind his thick white mustache. He remembered this before going to bed, knowing that the old man would leave soon afterward for a trip lasting several months, and that it would return after that time, just as the seasons change. Maximiliano learned to divide the year that way, according to his uncle's arrivals and departures, and winter was distinguished from spring only by the slight change in his uncle's appearance, or the scent of a different, warmer scent, like mallows. Because Uncle José and he would walk together when the flowers opened, just before each breakfast, between dawn and the hour when the maids had the table ready. And they would come in and sit at the table to be served behind the large window, which was opened only in the summer, and which remained fogged up in the winter, obscuring the shapes of the garden, hiding them as if there were something terrible and sinful in the winter fog.

Summers in Cádiz were stronger than anywhere else in Spain, so said the uncle. Together they would visit the port, and he would show him the boats, showing him how to differentiate their functions according to the shapes, ships and tonnage. And when he grew older, he let him visit the interior, walk through the cabins, play with the wheel, explore and read the gauges, decipher the indecipherable mystery of the compass. Uncle José expected him to be a sailor.

But he decided to follow God. That's why he was there, in the convent, on his first day of abandoning the world. He didn't know why the old man accompanied him. The night he decided to tell him his decision, Uncle José got up from the armchair where he was drinking his coffee after dinner and began hitting him. He never defended himself; to do so would have meant disrespecting the authority of the man who had raised him, and also an offense to the god who had called him. The god who told him, among other things, that he should turn the other cheek. Maximilian remained, that

night, kneeling on the library carpet, his face free of his hands, struggling to keep them clasped on his chest, as if praying, watching his own tears fall onto his trembling thumbs, and enduring the blows the old man gave him for ten minutes on his back and head, trying to knock him down and humiliate him, trying to undermine the resistance of that puny, weakling nephew, whose soul must be as rotten as the betrayal he had perpetrated against him. Because no less than betrayal could be called the act of becoming a faggot priest instead of following his desire: to be a virile merchant seaman, a grown man, the pride of his nation and his family.

When the old man stopped beating him, he left the library with a slam of the door. Maximilian collapsed on the floor, his body aching, and he dragged himself to the armchair. No one came to help him; the maids must have been crying, but they wouldn't disobey the old man's command that forbade them from entering. He raised his tearful gaze and saw the books that had been his friends throughout his life there. The only ones that hadn't deceived him, the ones that consoled him with their landscapes and his feelings, with the characters and ideas that emerged from their pages. Those locked display cases, the same key he would never touch again, gave off the smell of damp, paper and ink, the leather spines, and accumulated dust. He would miss even the dust, as much as touching the embossed letters on the covers, the pages freckled with damp, the sharp or jagged edges of the old editions, even some of the incunabula his uncle had obtained on his travels around the world. He stayed there all night. When he saw dawn outside the window, he went up to his room and took a hot bath, closing the door to the maids who asked for him. Two hours later, knowing he had missed breakfast and that his uncle must have eaten alone, he went out into the city to visit the church.

A week later, he entered the seminary, under the stern gaze of Uncle José. It was customary for a relative to accompany the seminarian in his departure from the world, and also for him to be given an offering that would be kept by the Order until the postulant completed his preparation as a novice. Maximilian entered his cell, handed over his clothes, and was given a white vest. He joined the other postulants in a long line that moved slowly down the central aisle of the convent's hermitage. The families were in the pews at the sides, the women looking on and crying, the men with serious and sad expressions. Some children looked frightened and waved to those who must have been their older brothers. He, like the others, had his head bowed, but he couldn't help but glance briefly in search of Uncle José. When they arrived at the altar, the closest relative would offer his offering, the postulant would place it in the priest's hands, and after a final kiss, would withdraw, disappearing into the dark cloisters.

When his turn came, his uncle approached with his hands clasped behind his back, frowning and evidently nervous, not because of where he was, but because of fury. Suddenly, Maximilian saw the offering: a fine leather whip, with an austere handle, inlaid only with dark stones that did not detract from the seriousness of the occasion. He sensed, or thought he did, a common understanding between his uncle and the priest. Perhaps it was a donation that would favor him in a way he did not wish to be favored. He took the whip in his hands, and when he was about to hand it to the priest,

the latter told him it wasn't necessary: the whip would fulfill the dignified function that the poor whips of the order performed with feverish and strenuous work. Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne knew from then on that he was privileged to receive unasked-for favors granted in exchange for other payments he would never suspect. Like those women on the street his uncle took him to meet when he turned fourteen, and he visited regularly every two weeks or twenty days from that time on. But he considered them pure in spirit, because moneyWhat they received had not previously passed through the hands of God. From them, he derived the fleeting happiness of the exhausted body, freed from the slow death that takes hold of each of us every morning when we wake up, which grows like a tightening of the tendons, a tingling that progressively transforms into numbness in the thighs and legs, a stirring of the spiritual machinery with the same fuel that feeds bodies, bread and water converted into human fluids, sweat and semen, and above all, a cry of helplessness that is expelled like someone furiously throwing something out of a window. The shattering of glass like the cry of a man who has copulated with a virgin desperate for love and sex, dead and reborn and then dead again, a few minutes after his own disintegration: the disappearance of his body as it joins another, the fusion and disengagement of the visceral machinery in a timeless sky the dimensions of a narrow bed. That's what they, the whores, did as a favor, knowing the disappointment they would carry like heavy bags on the backs of the men who left, leaving the money not as a reward, but as an offering to their own lives: to the virgin they'd killed, to the god they'd forgotten. And yet, their hands will remain clean.

But not the uncle's. And into those hands, Maximilian placed the most precious token that the novice was to give to his closest relative. Something to represent his abandonment, his sacrifice to worldly pleasures. He took his hand from his pocket and, with his fist enclosing something the uncle couldn't imagine, approached him and kissed him on the cheek. Their beards touched, mingling like the blood that ran through the veins of each of them. They felt the warmth of each other's skin and the beating of each other's hearts for an instant. Men and relatives, each thought without telling the other, brothers perhaps forever and without knowing it, ready to ignore the bond from now on for all eternity of their immortal spirits.

Did Uncle José believe in God, Maximilian wondered at that moment, beyond his regular visits to Church at Easter and Christmas, or accompanying the ladies he was attracted to or the old women to whom he was obligated? He didn't know. Only that his uncle's soul was as immortal as his own, and the large, robust body he was so proud of would one day fail and rise no more.

Uncle José, however, was the owner of the library where he had learned about God and men, about the inhabited and unexplored world, about science and the word. Therefore, he placed the key to the great library in his uncle's hard, firm palm. The old man looked at his own hand and the object resting in it, like a piece of metal torn from a larger object, a door, perhaps, an ornament of metal flowers on a metal and glass door separating the noise of the street from the silence of the old mansion and

its immortal library. A key is just that, then, a fragment of a door, an appendage whose loss can create the absolute closure of that space, of that uncreated peace like that generated by children growing in their mothers' wombs. The warmth and narrowness of a single seat, the coldness and expanse of a space that expands into the unknown darkness of the outside world. Doors that open from time to time, noises that disturb the meekness, the knowledge that creates peace. All the rest is noise and excitement, a parable of death and life and death, like sex. As women know.

They: the great bookless library of the world. They, whom he would renounce forever because God commanded him to. It wasn't the last time he saw Uncle José, but he imagined the old man would die in his mansion, a victim of the gout and arthritis that had finally overcome his resistance. The intermittent fever visited his body as it visited the house, drinking in his blood and reveling in his hard bones, just as the dampness gnawed at the walls and the moss greened the foundations. The servants would hear the old man's muffled moans from his bed, but anyone could have mistaken them for the gnawing and pacing of rats in the basement, where bags of cornmeal and wheat flour waited to be used in breads no one would eat. Uncreated breads, hosts imagined by the hostile mind of old Uncle José. Hosts used in ceremonies and orgies, white as skulls and the moon, like the necks of priests and the underwear of nuns. Maximilian remembered all this while the young woman from the boat cleaned his body, refreshing it not with water but with her hands, more intensely sweet than the irritating salt of the ocean. Absolutely inverse qualities: the thicker the layer of salt of the living world, the sweeter the scent of that woman who cleansed his body like someone cleaning the body of Christ. This was at the foot of the Cross.

3

Perhaps it was the intense sun that made the wounds the guards had inflicted burn even more, but even more painful were the bruises that continued to swell by the minute. His whole body felt almost numb, and when he tried to stand, his legs collapsed as if they were broken. He rolled sideways onto the deck floor, looked at his body, and saw that it was clean but dark. The sun had done its work during the voyage, but the purple color from the blows also accentuated the tan, turning violet as the afternoon wore on.

He didn't know how long he'd been there, but they'd covered him with a sheet and given him a kind of improvised pillow made from a bag of sand stolen from somewhere on the ship. He heard someone say:

"Here are some pants for the young man."

It was the voice of a mature woman, so close that he could smell her clothes and breath, but his eyelids were too swollen to clearly see the figure of the speaker.

"Thank you," a voice replied, and he knew that the pillow, so plump and soft, was no longer that of a sandbag—who knows when he'd taken it out, or how many times he'd fallen asleep and woken up, nor was he sure if it was still the same afternoon or the next—but the skirt of the young woman who had cleaned him. He recognized the scent of the hands that had run over his body with extreme gentleness over the sores and bruises. The same hands caressed his face and cheeks, the same fingers tangled in his hair. He wanted so much to open his eyes and look up, but he could only mumble a moan that made him realize that his lips, besides being swollen, were chapped and the roof of his mouth dry. They gave him a sip of sugar water to drink, but where would those outcasts at the stern have gotten their sugar, those exiles not only from their homeland but from the very ship on which they were traveling into exile? What is emigration if not another form of exile, a moving away from where we were born in search of a place that travels with us wherever we go. Not a city or a village, not even a province or a limited geographical region, but a country, a continent, or perhaps simply a beach or a mountain. There where the language is different even if it sounds similar, where the customs are as disparate as the arrangement of the dunes on two different beaches or the growth of the trees in so many distant forests.

The fresh water did him good, but above all the caress and the kiss that he felt as if offered through fabrics that were nothing more than his own inflamed skin. Nevertheless, that heat bordering on fever refreshed his body and spirit as if they were a single, amalgamated substance. And everything he had learned in the convent became capricious and arbitrary, rotting into an inexcusable falsehood because it revealed evil, or at least cynicism, as its origin. The eternal struggle between body and soul, the submission of the body, its condemnation to earth and time, the construction of the conglomeration of the soul like an unfinished tree, growing until it destroyed the body and expanded toward a sky that had never granted anything but promises. Perhaps the soul didn't need the body to feel its pain and its failures, however temporary they were, he thought dreamily, as the ship glided over the warm surface of the summer ocean. The body's pain wasn't an atonement, the pleasure of self-awareness wallowing in its own ego, or his proud existence spilling over into pleasurable self-affirmations of ability and omnipotence, he continued to say to himself in a very low voice, knowing that the young woman was listening, because she had placed her ear to his lips to understand his words. "Isn't blood a source of pride in human ability?" he asked, raising his voice for the first time.

She started and turned her head away for a moment. He feared he'd frightened her, afraid she'd abandon him and then feel helpless and alone, like a sick dog unable to feed itself, much less get up. But the young woman laughed, or at least smiled through her teeth, a faint hiss mingling with the sound of the waves. She shielded him from the sun with her head and a kind of blanket, but the sun still burned them all, and the water surrounding them was a mere simulation, a cruel intention of God, an indecent mockery of a merciless owner offering gallons of water to a dying

dog who could never drink it. To drink it was to die; not to drink it was also to die.

The brain of a sick man is perhaps no more complex than that of a mangy dog. Both confuse indifference with cruelty, love with hate. A hungry mind is capable of confusing the laughter of a young woman with the song of the sirens that devour it. to the sailors who succumb to his song. Maximilian would lie on deck until his flesh rotted, until the sun bred larvae in his bones, and these were nothing more than fragments only slightly more beautiful or more honorable than the wood of the deck, also the skeleton, in the end, of so many trees fallen under the axes of so many other men.

The sea is like a circle, the sea like a sphere. The planet is not square as the first navigators thought. There is no precipice on the horizon. Every fall is a beginning, and he knows that even if his flesh rots, another ship will sail with another similar body, at the disposal of the waves, which are nothing more than bubbles created by the fiery aquatic hells.

"My bones are like those of the moon..."

"He's delirious..." he heard the young woman say.

"Typhus?" asked an old man's voice.

"I don't think so, Papa. For me, it's the blows and the fever."

He heard nothing more. He fell asleep again. When he opened his eyelids again, it was night. The moon was absent, hidden by the thick clouds that were dropping a drizzle over all the bodies crammed into the stern. He shook his head and looked around at the dark piles of bodies huddled together and piled on top of each other, covered in cloth, as if they were truly corpses. Many of them would be dead before dawn, but for a few hours of the night, they would still enjoy the dubious privilege of continuing among the living, of simulating a breath that was beginning to decompose into fragments, into pieces of broken harmony. Out-of-tune instruments, with broken strings in an orchestra, a ship's band intended for the amusement of the passengers, now sounded with the cracked, low, atonal, and dissonant sounds of death. Death doesn't play a soft music on the violin, nor does she possess the high-pitched voice of a soprano nor the dark and expressive depth of a bass-baritone. Death breaks the strings she touches, dents the brass that tries to imitate her, gnaws at the wood, and fills the wind with a poisonous smell.

He heard snoring and coughing, the barking of dogs accompanying their owners. He had seen, a few days earlier, how the animals were thrown overboard. Some had even been killed and butchered. But a group of women stood up to the men who were doing this, and they had to give in.

"We're not savages!" they had said.

The men laid down their knives and threw the last dead dog into the sea. The other animals watched from the frightened arms of the children who owned them. Children stricken with typhus, yet still strong enough to protect their dogs. The drizzle now fell with a gentle mercy over his body, wetting the clothes they had dressed him in, licking and soaking the nooks

and crannies of his prone body. He wiped his face with his right hand. It felt distorted and still numb, but it no longer burned as before. As he lowered his hand again, he bumped into the leg of someone sleeping beside him. He turned his head and saw the face of the young woman who had cared for him all this time. Her eyes were closed, her head uncovered, and her hair wet. Trickle of water ran down her cheeks and lips.

Maximilian suddenly felt, amidst the still-recurring pain, the dampness of a hot night, an unexpected desire. He longed to touch those lips and then kiss them tenderly. My God, he said to himself, she is so beautiful...she is more beautiful than he had imagined.

Again he raised his right arm and straightened slightly, then slowly placed it under the gentle curve of her neck, nervous for fear of waking her. But the young woman didn't wake up, or if she did, she decided not to open her eyes and let him do what she too must have liked: rest on a man's arm, and feel that man rest thanks to her.

When dawn broke, he was in the same position he had fallen asleep in, but his right arm lay stretched out and empty, pale, numb from the position it had held for hours. It occurred to him, however, for a fleeting moment, that his arm had died during the night. The first part of his body to leave him, moving ahead of the grave that this time would be water. Had it been the demons of the depths who had taken the life from his arm? He remembered that that night he hadn't been able to see the moon, nor had he even felt the need, even the desperation, so many times before, to search for it. He had fallen asleep without feeling in his dreams the bones of the moon fall onto the surface of the water. He had not dreamed either of the demons emerging from the water to seize them, nor of the monsters whose strong arms and backs threw the bones of their fellow creatures from the rocky, arid, and always dark surface of the moon. Dreams without noise, without the screams or shrieks that were supposed to arise from those deformed creatures. Only the silence and the opaque light of the moon, the reflection of the water, and yes, the splash of the fall. And with the light of dawn emerging from the horizon astern, he knew that those bones might be the bones of God. The fetid bones of someone who has lived forever, whose skeleton feeds on his own flesh. Bones accustomed to the insipid, cloying, sad flesh that rots a millimeter every thousand centuries. The desperately slow, irreparable decomposition, indecently exasperating. Bones that God himself gets rid of when his own body expels them, just as one expels a splinter or an infected thorn.

God, little by little and in a way that no one, only perhaps those creatures of the moon, is emptying himself of bones. And when the time or non-time comes when he no longer has any left, he will be an amorphous mass crawling through the gaps of a universe that degrades like a corpse. Like graveyard worms. Like a reptile. Convinced that he would then be something else that must survive a new beginning of time. He must create gods and demons, heaven and earth. A new, renewing, vital war, like an atonement for old resentment, or the reparation of ancestral remorse.

But there were still too many bones left for Maximilian to have any intention of worrying about the end of time. Observing and studying God's actions was a task he had set himself to accomplish for as long as he lived. To see the moon was to see the nape of God's neck, so he turned his back on the rising sun and stood up, straining with his weak arms. Hands helped him; he looked behind him and saw the face of an old man, who said to him:

"Don't worry..."

On the other side was the young woman; he recognized the hands holding his own. Without saying anything, she covered him with a damp blanket. When he trembled, because he was wearing only an old pair of pants, she removed the blanket and scolded the old man:

"But Father, this blanket is soaked, Holy Virgin!" She threw the cloth to the floor and refused to accept the man's excuse.

"But Elsa, no one has a better one..." her father replied.

"Then it's better to let the sun warm him."

She helped Maximiliano walk across the deck. He felt weak, his legs were shaking, and she realized he had a fever.

"What day is it today? What's wrong with me?"

She called her father, and together they helped him stand.

"He needs to get stronger; we'll feed him in a little while. They hit him very hard; his wounds were infected."

She felt his forehead with the back of her hand, and it felt cold and comforting.

"He still has a fever; luckily the weather helps."

He was about to ask how the scorching sun could relieve him, but she didn't say anything. The hands of the young woman and her father were the first to comfort him in a long time. The skin of her hand, above all, that exquisite softness of tanned skin, that soothing coolness of a hand exposed to the filth and infection of those she cared for. Contradictions for which God himself would never provide convincing explanations. Maximiliano knew this as much as he knew that walking across the deck arm in arm with her was the closest thing to happiness he had felt in a long time.

"What is your grace?" she asked, her eyes shining with a sweetness comparable only to her voice and tone of voice. A voice irritated by the prevailing climate on deck, probably also the effect of typhus.

"Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne, at your service, miss."

She laughed, looking at her father knowingly.

"My name is Elsa Aranguren, and this is my father, Don Roberto. We're from Ronesvalles."

He had never visited the Pyrenees, and he searched the girl's body for signs that betrayed a harsh rural life, herding cattle, and exposure to the mountain sun. He saw only tanned skin, the contours of a firm, proportionate body. Her hands were long, smooth, and dark. Her eyes were black, with a slight purple hue. He imagined her herding cows or sheep, or perhaps goats, in the high mountains. The Roncesvalles Pass, across the border with France, was nearby. There was even a faint French accent in the family's way of speaking, which was only now becoming prominent. As if they had somehow taken up residence in his plane of the world, in Maximilian's temporal plane.

The journey across the sea had stripped people of their identity; only things gained value. Fresh water and food, clothing and medicine, shade under an overhang made of planks and cloth. The sun, above all, had ceased to be a phenomenon and had become what until then had been God's idea for the world. Not a guide, but a judge from whom a sentence was expected every day.

"Are you feeling better, Mr. Iribarne?" asked the old man, who had only heard the last name.

"Better, thank you, Don Roberto."

The man Ambre smiled for the first time, and taking him from his daughter's hands, he took it upon himself to carry him to the blanket where he had slept.

"What day is it today?" he asked again.

"Wednesday," she said. "It's been two days since they beat him."

He was surprised to learn that this meant nothing to him, after those thirty days that had seemed like sixty. Or that long week after leaving the convent, as long as a year spent in a chamber of pain.

4

The Inquisition was over, but the remnants of that evil habit remained, rooted in the souls of men. The human soul is a collective entity. Maximilian thought this when he read theology books. Individual souls did not really exist, nor could they even be considered numbers that made up a larger sum, and which theologians, through mysterious codes whose keys they found and lost at will, like children following a capricious yet rigid game under their father's watchful eye, transformed into letters to form a very short word in almost every language in the world. God was the simplest, most exquisitely brief word in the human vocabulary. A word that even aphasics and stutterers had no difficulty pronouncing. The letter "d" was the first a child learned to say when they still barely had the beginnings of their future teeth. The tongue, whose symbolism of death, sex, and language, the pure anatomy of man, was the first instrument of faith.

But if Maximilian had said this to his seminary teachers, they would have punished him with seven days of complete isolation in his cell, with a reduced food ration and without the privilege of attending the three daily Masses. This was what happened two months after his arrival. They were in the refectory, eating breakfast from their bowls, listening to Father John reading while they sat at the long, bare wooden tables, where ancient scratches had barely pierced the surface, where only bread crumbs dared to lie unscorned or their owners punished for distracting themselves by playing with them. This ambivalence in the concept of hygiene was curious. The refectory and common rooms had to be kept strictly clean, bare to the point of inconceivability, to the point where the darkness shone with its opaque presence. But in their cells, they were left almost to their own devices. Bedclothes were changed whenever they wanted, and anyone who forgot was neither reprimanded nor lectured. Underwear, of which everyone had only one or two sets, was worn until its owner decided to wash it. The cassock worn by each of them had belonged to a deceased priest, and its worn surface at the elbows, knees, and even the neck gave an image of veiled old age to men who were mostly no more than twenty years old.

Maximilian placed his spoon on the table, and his companions looked at him. Ignoring them, he looked up at Father Juan and asked:

"Excuse me, Father, but I would like to ask a question about the chapter you are reading."

The priest looked up from his Bible, took off his silver-framed glasses with a trembling hand. He searched the room for the voice of the one who had spoken and found the raised arm of one of the seminarians. He decided to ignore him rather than impose a penance. He lowered his gaze again, but the question reached him clearly, and the impertinent tone was even clearer.

"Father, I would like to know if you think that what we call 'God's call' must be expressed in the same way by everyone to be considered real, or if each person must interpret it or feel it according to their conscience."

The priest looked at him in astonishment as he listened. He realized he was breaking the rules, but he couldn't have said why he did it anyway. Perhaps it was the latent, undigested memory of handing over his uncle's whip and returning the library key. Maximilian was ready to tell everyone that he didn't need a key to think.

"What is your name, Brother?" the priest asked.

"Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne, Father."

The priest seemed to remember, nodded, and said:

"First, the answer: when the Lord speaks to us, He does so in silence. No words are needed, only the most extreme silence." When you hear it, it will be nothing more than the rustling of the wind through the leaves of a tree, or the barking of a dog, or the passing of a cart on a Sunday afternoon. How can you differentiate "the call" then? Not with your conscience; that's

where you're wrong. Not even with your spirit, because very few in this world are mature enough to know how to listen that way. When it happens, your body knows it, my son. And if it doesn't know it, it's because it didn't happen.

He paused, cleared his throat, and wiped his lips with a handkerchief.

"Now for the punishment."

And Thus, Maximilian was sentenced to seven days of solitary confinement, with half a daily ration and the obligation to remain naked until each of those seven nights, Father Michael opened the door and checked the number of lacerations he was to self-flagellate. Then he returned the cassock to Maximilian and closed the door. The echo of the lock resonated in the cloisters, accentuated by the cold and dampness, which dug into the walls, forming labyrinths in which his mind was lost each night, searching for the face of God while he prayed, while he tried to fall asleep covered by a worn cassock. The wind penetrated through the cracks in the windows, under the doors, just as pain penetrated his body, for he still did not know what a soul could be.

On the last morning of punishment, they did not come to remove his clothes. The sentence had been carried out, and he was just one of the others. He had received twice as many lashes on his back and chest, on his thighs and the soles of his feet. He looked at his hands before opening the door himself.

"Praise God," he murmured before letting the smallest shred of light enter the cell, and walked out to the first Mass of the day. Lent had begun. He could smell the burning branches in the convent garden, and he could hear the singing and chanting of the call to Mass, the funeral bells ringing listlessly. His skin felt tight and burning, sweat dripped down his face, and he smelled like a rotten piece of flesh covered in a black scab as he walked toward the nave of the convent.

When he reached the altar, and while only a few dared to look up from their Bibles to look at him, he crossed himself and slowly managed to kneel. Everyone was forbidden to help him if he fell, so it was a small triumph to feel like he was there again, inhaling the incense and contemplating Christ on his cross, with a pride that was certainly irreverent, but one he couldn't help. Is happiness a sin, or should we be ashamed of our own strength or joy? Christ wasn't smiling; the Church was expanding in its own empty ego, in its air of complete emptiness. Like the chant that now resounded from the rows of seats, not sad but meditative. God is not the imitation of a word, but a guttural sound.

To feel God in the body is the only thing we can do, Maximilian told himself as he went to his place with the others. Conscience and thought had created God since the beginning of time. Without men, there was no God. Battlefields were built with bodies, and the body was the greatest battlefield. Time and the gods played their ancestral tournaments in the bodies of men. Sterile or fertile bodies, healthy or sick, strong, weak, old, beautiful or ugly. The bones were the prize, for within them endured the

substance from which the great progenitors of the world were made. The stone persisted. The gods, fathers of demons and men, persisted.

"Are they listening to me?" he said in a very low voice, and those closest looked at him. He ignored it. He felt someone place a hand on his right shoulder, but the burning was too much like an anesthetic, and he barely noticed when the hand was gone. He turned and saw that it had been one of his companions. He didn't know his name, like any of the others. He couldn't have said when he had first seen him, or if he sat near or far in the refectory, or where his cell was. Not even if he had entered with him or had been there before. He was blond, though like all of them, his head was almost shaved. The beard, a mandatory symbol of the order, was thick but grew in tufts that slowly covered his hairless parts.

Maximilian imagined he must have entered at the same time as him, because his beard wasn't very long, and he was also extremely young. He couldn't have been more than fifteen years old. He was tall and thin. His gaze was melancholic, but not sad, rather thoughtful, rather serene.

He was looking at him knowingly and winked. His lips moved with a word he understood perfectly: "Strength." He returned the favor with a smile that tried to be sincere despite his pain and exhaustion. When the bell rang, Maximilian fell asleep, and no one noticed until his companion on his right, the same one who had tried to comfort him a few minutes before, picked him up and helped him walk to his cell.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying in it. Father Esteban sat in a chair next to his bed, wiping away the sweat with a cloth that was already very damp, but which the priest continued to wipe over Maximiliano's forehead, face, and hands. Drop upon drop of perspiration, soaking the cloth until it exhausted its capacity to absorb all the human fluid released when a fever sets in. As was happening now: an intense cold. in the cell, which made him tremble, yet he felt such an intense heat that he made the futile effort to get up and remove his clothes. That old, thin, worn cassock was even worse than if it were new and thick. It was the old smell, the aroma of the perspiration of the one who had worn it before. Its previous owner had been dead for a long time, and his bones must have been dry by now, but the old sweat was revived in the fabric by the warmth of another man. And it was, Maximilian told himself, the way in which generation after generation, knowledge lies beneath, survives, makes its way through the paths of dead flesh.

"Stay still, son."

Father Esteban's voice was hoarse, and from the back of his throat came a breath like wind, held back for so long that it now sounded like a muffled, hidden whistle, stretched to the very end of his patience, that patience that every moan endures in silence until it bursts and is released. Father Esteban's voice matched his appearance: stocky and short, with a salt-and-pepper beard, no more than forty years old, with brown eyes and sun-tanned skin. He was one of the gardeners and cultivators of the convent's orchard. Although this wasn't his usual position, he had chosen it just as he dedicated himself to cleaning the floors or the toilets, preparing meals,

reading in the refectory, or caring for the sick. He was one of the few who left the convent without permission to shop, and he made repairs or intervened in conflicts between the Bishop and his many opponents.

Maximilian looked at him with feverish eyes and asked:

"What happened to me, Father?"

"You fainted, son. Brother Aurelio lifted you up and brought you here."

"And where is he?"

Father Esteban unbuttoned his cassock and wiped his chest. Maximilian was panting, and his breath was stale.

"You already know." He broke the rules...

Maximilian knew it wasn't fair. If he'd been punished, it was because of his own arrogance in daring to speak in the refectory, but Brother Aurelio had acted out of mercy.

"But it's not fair..." he said, knowing that even now he was breaking the rules, not only the rules of silence, but also imposing a challenge on his superior.

Father Esteban ordered him to be silent with a finger to his lips. He began to hum a non-religious song. Maximilian didn't recognize it, but he knew it wasn't one of the permitted ones. It sounded like a lullaby, or an old ballad. It had no lyrics; it was just the sound hidden in Father Esteban's closed mouth. He closed his eyes, abandoning himself to the closest chant, the ringing of the bells calling for evening Mass. He drifted off, as unlived memories returned to his forgotten memory. Times when his mother walked hand in hand with his father along the beaches of Cádiz, on summer nights, along the shore of a sea lit by a white moon that even then cast bones. But he couldn't see them yet, couldn't even imagine them, because he hadn't yet been born. Only now did he realize that bones fell from the moon like rain around that couple who would one day bear him. And those bones were like white drops of hardened semen that the moon, male and female simultaneously, cast onto the beach. Further away, on the surface of the sea, other fragments of God fell to be devoured by the hell of the depths.

His father and mother would make love on that beach that and many other nights, restless and nervous, without fully undressing, only excited and satisfied, disillusioned and happy at the same time, surrounded by the dark moonlight, surrounded by the bones of dead gods in whose marrow the worms of life would grow again. They, man and wife, were taking care of that while they embraced, while their kisses sheltered in the concave darkness of the night's mouth.

For the next few days, they fed him while he regained strength and felt his legs no longer tremble. The sun continued to drive him mad, the dogs passed by and licked his reddened face. Don Roberto was in charge of fixing the blanket that provided shade, but Maximiliano told him:

"Don't worry, today I'm getting up to help you."

"Help with what?" asked the old man, his arms raised as he tried to straighten the blanket, blown by the wind. At that moment, his daughter arrived, looking worried at what was happening.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Don Maximiliano wants to get up," said the father, his brow raised, as if demonstrating his disapproval of the young man's boldness, determined to oppose his daughter's wish.

"How is that, my lord? You're still weak."

But Maximilian stood up, to demonstrate with actions rather than words that he was ready to resume his life and begin what he had decided to do the day he passed through the guard separating the sick.

"You see me," he said, opening his arms as if to show off, pointing to his thinner body and his haggard face, his disheveled hair and sunburned skin, barefoot and wearing only old wool pants that were too small for him, revealing his calves and the crease of his buttocks. Don Roberto laughed, and his daughter couldn't help it either, covering her mouth with one hand and pointing at Maximiliano with the other.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking around for something funny. Then she saw the boy who had called him that day on deck, laughing too when he saw him tugging at his pants again. He realized what was making the others laugh and tried to lift his pants, which only brought the ends to his knees and made them even tighter in the front. The women laughed or covered their eyes in embarrassment, the men suffered spasms of laughter. Don Roberto approached him and patted him on the back. "Don't worry, Don Maximiliano, I'll give you one of mine."

Half an hour later, he was wearing a pair of pants two sizes too big, tied at the waist with a string, and a shirt that also belonged to the old man.

"Thank you, Don Roberto," but the man refused to accept it, seeing that his daughter was happy looking at them both.

"You make my Elsa laugh..." he said simply, with the brief look and the curtness of his words that mountain men are accustomed to. Then he walked away toward a group of men who were waiting for him, murmuring as he glanced occasionally at the couple.

Elsa had approached Maximiliano.

"Do I look better now?"

"You look very good, Don Maximiliano."

"Are you going to teach me how to help the sick?"

She looked at him at first rudely, then condescendingly.

"Why did you come in here, if I may ask?"

"Because I wanted it that way." I was a seminarian, dear Elsa...

She blushed at that treatment.

"Forgive me if I offended you; it was spontaneous, a form of gratitude. Didn't you save my life?"

"I did nothing more than take care of him, and it was also an act of spontaneity, of charity between us... Who else is going to help us until we reach America? We're lucky they didn't throw us overboard."

The wind blew across the deck, soothing the heat and irritated skin. Elsa's hairdo, tied at the nape of her neck, left a few strands loose, swaying, as if dancing, around her face. He tucked them behind her ears and watched her eyes close for a moment, with pleasure, as if resting. None of them noticed how the others were looking at them.

"You're very tired too; you should take a full day to sleep."

She shrugged and said:

"What's the point?" It would be a wasted day, and the next day I'd be just as tired as before. If I fell asleep, I think I wouldn't wake up again, so I continue, and I think I'm not tired at all.

"But were you sick?"

"I don't think so, but my father was. With a fever, and he was miraculously saved. As you see him today, he's half of what he was. He looks like a weak old man, and when he boarded this ship, he was a fat, robust man, brimming with health."

"I understand. That's why you take care of others; you think you won't get sick if you haven't until now."

"That's right."

A pause of silence between them was followed by the ship's siren announcing lunch for the healthy passengers. They knew that two hours later their food would arrive, wrapped in rags and on plates that would then be thrown into the sea. A murmur and shouts of protest accompanied, as had been customary since the beginning of the isolation, that siren, which was now a symbol of segregation, accompanied that siren.

"We have time for you to meet the sick, come on."

He followed her toward the stern where the dying were lying. He'd heard them before when he'd been out of that area, especially at night. Moans and a few screams that sounded like howls, cries that resembled the hooting of owls in a forest. Only this was a forest of water and the ship a metal vessel that leveled the trees. The sea was what he was leaving

behind, a desert where the owls lamented because there was nowhere left to settle, nowhere to rest, nowhere where their large eyes could stalk the night, watch over it like policemen keeping a check on ghosts, their excessive ambitions for leadership, their excessive pretensions of games and mischief. The sea was like a desert inhabited by songs already dead, illuminated by stars as distant as they were ignorant and indifferent to everything, to evil and to the sea that men traveled on a ship, a battleship, an icebreaker, making their way through the frozen forest of humanity that had been dying since the beginning of time. And he had seen, as he pursued the itinerary and the seasons of the moon, the bones falling into the sea accompanied by the rhythm of those pre-death moans.

Now that he approached them in broad daylight, the sun had the opposite effect, but the result was as close as night. The beams of light were paths in the air, illuminating, as they do in an empty room, the motes of dust or the tiniest insects, those bones, or the shadows, the residue, the trails of dust, perhaps, that those bones left behind after their long, drawn-out nightfall, right up until dawn, or perhaps even into the early hours. And at midday, when no shadow should have existed, Maximilian discovered that it still lived, metamorphosed, hidden in the beams of light, protected by what we consider its enemy and is probably its lover. As if light were the prostitute, the lover, the protector, the mother of shadow.

He crouched beside each man, woman, and child, while Elsa told him their name, how long they had been ill, and then, as they moved away, the chances of each one surviving, according to the ship's doctor.

"But the doctor comes with his nurses and assistants and treats them like cattle." He doesn't have the slightest concern for their dignity. He doesn't even touch them. He kicks aside the blankets, has his assistants take their pulse or fever with gloves and masks, and doesn't even let the nurse touch them. He gives me the report because he knows I was a nurse in my town, at least for a while...

"I didn't know that, I think it's very commendable..."

"Nothing like that, just a couple of years in the nearest hospital, but I hope to make a living from my job in America. And what are you going to do, Maximiliano?"

"I don't know yet. I guess I'll work at whatever comes along."

"But why are you traveling?"

Maximiliano couldn't help but smile.

"I don't have a reason, Elsa. Now I think it's because I'm here, helping on this ship, and tomorrow it will be for another reason. The present is the only reason for everything, sufficient for any explanation."

She remained thinking, her gaze fixed on his eyes, or perhaps on his red forehead and his wind-tossed hair.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing in particular, just that in my town there's an old woman who goes to mass every day. Everyone knows her and avoids her because all she does is talk about punishments and give warnings. She sees nothing but the bad in everyone she passes on the street. One day she appeared to me as I turned a corner and said something before I could blurt out. The future can't be fixed, she said, and today is already gone."

"That's an interesting idea, if I may say so. There are theologians who talk about the same thing; of course, they need many more words and pages..."

They both laughed, and their bodies drew closer without realizing it, and their hands wanted to take each other's but didn't dare, and they didn't have to talk about it because at that moment the kitchen staff arrived with the food. They were five men dressed in aprons, gloves, and masks, like surgeons offering parts of the bodies they had just operated on as food. It was curious that that image came to Maximiliano's mind. Christ had also been a surgeon to his own body; he had explored, analyzed, and removed its parts, purifying it until every fragment was worthy of becoming food for the others. And now these men brought what were the remains of the food the healthy passengers had left, although none of the crew, least of all the captain, would have recognized it.

They approached the guards, and one by one they left the large pots, the plates wrapped in cloth, the large bottles of water. They came and went several times, until the entire pile was deposited at the entrance to the isolated area, and then, silently, and ignoring the usual protests of the sick, they turned and returned to the stairs that descended to the kitchen. Some glanced back before disappearing, while taking off their masks or aprons, and Maximilian noticed that they were looking at them with that human mixture of pity and contempt, of tolerance and fear. The men and women, relatives of the sick or exposed, or the sick themselves who could take care of themselves, rushed toward the food and began to argue as they did every day. Maximilian had heard these arguments while he lay with a fever, but only now did he realize the absurd attitude of all of them. He would have liked to step between them and urge them to reason, to distribute the food logically and calmly. But he was sure they would consider him an intruder hoping only to gain an advantage. He took Elsa by the elbow and looked at her, questioning her without saying a word.

"I know, but what can we do..."

"And how do you and your father get food if you don't fight?"

"There's always something left at the end. We eat very little..."

The group by the entrance was large, mostly men pushing each other with gestures that mimicked challenges that in another time and place would have meant dishonor or an invitation to a duel or a fight. Now they were nothing more than poor, weak movements; their hoarse voices soon wore thin, and those bodies, dressed in dirty, sweaty clothes, gave way to the women, who appeared behind them to claim what their husbands hadn't had the strength or the cunning to obtain: a piece of bread, a bowl of broth, a piece of undercooked meat. They arrived with their hair tied at the nape

of their necks, but loose when the buckles came loose with the slaps and shoves. Some sent their children scurrying between their legs, and they were the ones who sometimes got the best of it, because so much food fell to the floor in the midst of so much fighting. Sometimes the pots were overturned, as happened this time, and everyone protested, while the guards watched first with contempt, then with mockery, and finally with laughter, as if they saw jesters acting in their service. And Maximilian had to admit they were right: they behaved worse than clowns, because, after all, clowns were acting, but the sick were victims of their own humiliation.

It was true that the situation was desperate. Without food, without medicine, without help in the middle of the ocean. And even though they weren't isolated, even though healthy people were just steps away, enjoying good food, perhaps dancing to the rhythm of a brass band, and there were radios with which to communicate with the rest of the world, they knew they were discarded. That was the word: not forgotten or stripped of rights, but simply discarded like corpses. The stern was a cemetery within the ship itself, and the simple act of throwing them into the sea when their hearts stopped was comparable to when graves are unearthed after many years and the bones are thrown into the ossuary or crematorium.

Yes, Maximilian said to himself, confirming what he had been thinking for some time. The sea was hell where demons waited for their food. The bones of men and women, the fragments of the father god who had engendered them in his image and likeness. Those were the primordial bones, just like those they received from the moon at night. All of them countless, innumerable pieces of God. Each petrified cell was a bone, a rock, a portion of time, a tiny bit of pity and mercy stolen from the corpse of God. Phalanges excised from the tomb of the universe, a piece of the skull split with a chisel and a hammer, like half a shell found on a beach, or a plucked lock of hair, a split and blackened fingernail. Even some demons would have given up half their eternity to obtain a testicle from the envied God. To hold in their infernal hands the very seed of creation, and to pretend to be the origin, the future, and the owner of a new universe, knowing that that testicle was nothing more than a dead toy, and imagination the only instrument ever valid for any act that included sex and procreation as objectives. Perhaps God was also impotent most of the time, or perhaps the great womb, the concavity formed by the confluence of time and space at just the right moment, in the period immediately following menstruation, the bleeding in which the walls of that spectral symbiosis, that sidereal convergence, are rebuilt, lacked tonicity, libido, sufficient enthusiasm and preparation to receive the divine semen.

God, like man, knows that everything depends on something uncertain and speculative; even his own mind is nothing compared to the fate of his own destiny. Exposed and intimidated by his very nature: the weakness of evil, the fiction of happiness, the impotence of good, and his incurable psychosis. He had read Freud's texts in Uncle José's library, but where was God's psychoanalyst, where was the couch where he could explain himself and delve into the old traumas of a god who is his own father and his own son? If man is his image, it's logical to think that God has the same

problems as man. Hysteria and repression, regret and guilt, remorse and ruthless cruelty.

For the next few hours, he observed the inequitable and inequitable distribution of food, the fights slowly quelled by his own exhaustion, the exhaustion created by the afternoon sun, and his stomach, at least partially, satisfied. The children went to bed, the women busied themselves cleaning the deck, some of the men reclined, others did manual labor or repaired things, built awnings, and wove nets. Many fished, but the women scolded them because they threw the corpses into those same waters.

Maximilian walked along the rows of sick people. He remembered the names Elsa had mentioned, and if not, he would ask the same dying people again. Some answered in their sleep, others remained silent, sweating and coughing. He carried a bucket of water to clean. He helped to keep the sputum from accumulating. He changed the clothes of five people with diarrhea and fed ten sick children. Elsa helped him, but she had her own people to whom she was devoted, and from time to time she glanced at him. He would then smile and say something with his lips, and although she pretended not to understand, he was sure she did.

Almost at dusk, the doctor arrived for his daily checkup. It was more of an examination of the dead than a visit to see the results of any treatment. From Elsa, he knew that no medication had been applied. The doctor, whose name he didn't know, approached him and said:

"I'm surprised by your recovery, but I was even more surprised to see you here a few days ago..."

"I no longer have a choice, as you see, but this is my place..."

The doctor looked at the nurse suspiciously.

"I don't understand..."

"I've been a priest for a few months; I've studied theology. My duty is to help the sick."

"Of course, that's true." I recognized you as a cultured man the time we spoke, but I didn't know about your religious background. Look, I'd like to examine you and get you out of this mess...

Maximiliano smiled, without responding.

"Come on," the doctor said, taking him by the arm and indicating to his nurse that she could touch him without fear.

Maximiliano resisted.

"I won't leave the place, doctor. I appreciate your intention, but in return for your favor, I would like you to take more care of these patients."

The doctor glared at him angrily. Elsa was listening to them and approached, her expression alarmed.

She touched Maximiliano's elbow and spoke in his ear. She was right, he whispered back, but sometimes you had to push people.

"It's fine, for you," the doctor replied. That afternoon he stayed half an hour longer than usual. He examined the dead and noted the improvement in some of the patients. But his instructions were nothing more than orders regarding hygiene and, above all, isolation from the uninfected passengers. The attendants began to lift the dead to throw them into the water, but Maximilian shouted at them:

"Wait, please." Then he turned to the doctor: "Doctor, the women asked me to say a few words for the dead."

The doctor, with close-cropped gray hair, a thick beard, and silver glasses, looked around. In front of him was the former priest, many women, and several sick children. The wind was blowing the smoke from the ship's chimneys westward. It was a long way to reach America, and the situation was getting out of hand. He felt tired and overwhelmed, limited to being a coroner rather than a doctor. He hated leaving the lower floors, where the heat was less and the people were healthy, where the sky didn't exist and therefore didn't reveal the filth and filth, the dead life of those men and women he could never help. If they were already condemned, he detested them, just as he abhorred impotence and mediocrity.

Without saying anything, only signaling to his attendants, he withdrew with his retinue: the men dressed in green and the tall, clean-cut sick woman, covered in white with half her face covered like a Muslim maiden. He looked like an Arab sheikh retreating to his chambers in the depths of the ship, abandoning the desert around him, the desert of water as undrinkable as sand.

It was getting dark when everything was ready for the ceremony. Elsa had helped him prepare everything: the missal that Maximilian carried in his worn suitcase, which she held before his gaze. After reading a paragraph, he gave her a kind look, far removed from the sadness of that sunset that witnessed a service on the ship for the first time. A farewell, whispered in the worn and weak voice of a man who had once wanted to be a priest and was now nothing more than a remnant of that ambition: a former priest. He who committed himself to God ceased to be one of the species and became an animal of another's will, a kind of walking law, a judge and prosecutor who represented God. The former priest felt shame, the man remorse, but the person standing next to that woman was a third person, reading in a missal what had been read and understood so many times, but today expressed as a conjecture, a suspicion, a clue that became even clearer in the colors of the twilight and in the sphere of the sun that was sinking, dissolving into the horizon of the sea. The wind was the voice of God blowing in the throat of the man who had once wanted to be a priest. The women repeated their chant, the men bowed their heads as if praying, but remained silent, either unfamiliar with the prayers, or out of shame or pride. The dogs howled at the rising moon, and the children insisted on silencing them, but little was achieved with scolding or petting. The moon

was rising, and Maximilian could see it clearly now, without needing to chase it. He looked into Elsa's eyes, and they were two reflections. Number two, always. Two organs for conceiving, two organs for suckling, two for seeing and hearing, two for touching and walking. Two for loving and procreating.

He raised his hands and recited:

—Victimae paschali laudes immolent christiani. Death and life engaged in an imposing duel: the author of life, though dead, now reigns alive.

He knew he was making an irreverent remix, a loose version of the Mass, but it was true that he was doing it now as a layman, and forgiveness and condescension would be granted him like any other. But he also knew it wasn't true. He had known exactly how to say Mass, without yet forgetting it, and what he was doing was an irreverence that nevertheless satisfied him and made him feel somehow more alive than before. Someone different from the one who had boarded the ship a month before. Farther away, beyond the guards' barriers, he saw some of the healthy passengers and part of the crew watching the ceremony with curiosity and due respect. Perhaps the captain was there, and the doctor as well. Probably the ship's sexton was looking angrily at this improvised ceremony. But was there a sexton there? he wondered. He hadn't seen one during the entire voyage, nor had he sought one out. He never appeared to comfort the sick, not even to calm the spiritual anxiety of the healthy. Probably there wasn't one; it wasn't obligatory for there to be one on a ship of that type. It was he, the one now fulfilling the role, who commanded everyone's attention, the eyes of almost the entire ship, and through them, he had once again become someone more important than a mere man. Then he recited, proud and defiant, turning his gaze toward the captain, whom he guessed, even though he couldn't see him in the darkness of the night that consumed the deck, listening intently. "The earth trembles and rests, because God rises in judgment."

Elsa trembled, and her hands almost dropped the missal. She quickly recovered and looked at him. He simply smiled, making the sign of the cross in the air. Those present crossed themselves. Then he walked toward the bodies and began to sprinkle drops of holy water on them. He walked beside them, followed by Elsa and two children serving as altar boys. Some had gotten him bay leaves stolen from the kitchen, and after crushing them with his fingers, he threw them over the bodies as well. When he reached the last one, he said:

"You may consign the bodies to the sea."

Then four shoulders began to carry the bodies wrapped in makeshift shrouds made of old blankets and threw them over the railing. The impact of the bodies against the surface of the sea was a dull thud, a splash muffled by the growing force of the waves against the hull. When the last one was thrown in, Maximilian leaned out and watched them sink. And it was then that he heard, or felt, for the first time, what would later haunt him in his dreams.

The bodies were being sucked in. They didn't sink slowly, or even quickly, as would happen if they had a weight acting as an anchor. Literally sucked in, they disappeared from the surface of the water no more than two minutes after being thrown in. Elsa stood beside him, leaning on the railing, and looked at her in case she was seeing what he was seeing. He saw no surprise or astonishment, only tears and enormous exhaustion.

"Why are they sinking so fast?" he asked.

Without looking at him, she managed to respond with an argument she had undoubtedly heard from others.

"Typhus consumes the bronchi, leaving the lungs empty, which is why they fill with water so quickly..."

"But that would happen if they were still breathing..."

"I don't know, Maximilian, why do you ask me?"

"Can't you see, can't you hear?" he asked, surprised by her blindness.

He had begun to hear the song of joy, a hosanna from underwater. The demons had their masses of rejoicing, their missals, just like the disciples of God. He raised his gaze to the moon and saw the bones falling to the surface of the water, on the choppy waves. The long bones and skulls being slammed against the ship's hull. He could feel the impact of those broken bones reverberating throughout the ship's structure, and he had the desperate urge to take Elsa's hands and run for cover, to help her hold on to something as that tidal wave of bones passed.

"Are you feeling ill, Maximilian?"

He looked at her. He felt drenched in sweat, his heart pounding, and his hands clenched around Elsa's elbows.

"He hurts me," she said.

He let go of her and covered his face. She tried to push his hands away.

"Please tell me what's wrong..."

Then all he could say, like someone daring to say something out loud for the first and only time, weeping and refusing to accept the truth his own mouth was speaking:

"God is dead, my dear Elsa. Who knows how long he's been dead?"

6

For the next sevenFor days, Maximilian thought of Brother Aurelius. He knew that his isolation was even more severe than his own, because consciously disobeying the rules of the Order was punished more severely than simply expressing a thought. What he had done was discuss principles, debate dogma and theology, and as dangerous as this was to the

stability of an institution as firmly rooted as the Church, he was granted a slight flexibility. Even the wood of an old trunk has the capacity to sway in a strong wind, because it is in its nature to know that if it does not yield, it will split in two.

The Church, then, allows for certain doubts, grants permission for some questions to be asked aloud. Enough to give the impression of freedom, but always up to the exact limit that the image and fear of God establish: the barrier that faith must overcome and before which hope must stop, perhaps forever. Faith and hope are two carts pulled by two old and tired horses, whose eyes gaze at the wall that represents the face of God, absorbed in thought, as if capable of reading laws inscribed with chisel. One waits, the other also waits. Both with their noses drooping, lifting their eyelids from time to time, knowing that there is no one in the carts they pull, only the shadow of the world they left behind.

Disobeying the rules of the Order was punished with seven days of solitary confinement and a meager ration of food. Every night, a guard opened the door and witnessed the self-flagellation of the punished brother. Both looked at each other, holding their gaze on the other's body, so that neither could collapse from exhaustion or grief, neither the one being punished nor the one who should impose discipline. It was probably Father Esteban who was in charge of surveillance, and although the superiors knew of his clear weakness toward his disciples, they left him in charge of the punishment of Brother Aurelio. After all, he was a very young novice, still too young, to be subjected to such extreme rigidity that bordered on absolute isolation or a complete lack of help.

Maximilian wondered what would happen if his companion were to cry out. No one in those cloisters could come to him, not only because it was forbidden, but also because of the silence that dominated the place. Except for the bells and the litanies, what happened behind the cell doors was a mystery known only to those who lived there. Generally, there was solitude and nakedness, and a few moans of lamentation. Few prayers inside the cell, but much tiredness and boredom, much sorrow and despair. But like all seeds, they germinate and engender invisible beings that cannot live in the dry humidity of that place, and so they become questions, which, like all questions, are sterile and vain in hope, with no future, unless they find an answer. And the answers he might find behind those doors are hidden or murdered as soon as they open. Sunlight enters, but not the light of certainty.

Self-punishment, then, nullified the capacity for remorse and self-pity. This was how Maximilian must have seen Brother Aurelio in those moments: sitting up in his bed, his back curved, his elbows resting on his knee, and his head in his hands. With his eyes closed or open, but either way, watching the flies buzzing around him, landing in his dirty hair, prowling the mattress, and savoring the aroma coming from the porcelain basin hidden under the bed. Perhaps Brother Aurelio wouldn't dare move all day from that position, the only one that guaranteed the slow healing of the wounds from the previous night. If he thought something, he wouldn't know how to express it in any way, except through silence, more expressive

than any other form of communication. The buzzing of flies was music, the bells marked the beginning and end of the day, and the distant songs of the brothers were an echo and a shadow of the world he had left behind, forever.

When he saw him again at evening Mass, sitting in the same place from where he had seen him coming to help him the day he fainted, he intended to get his attention somehow. He was two rows ahead, on the right. He looked in that direction when he should have been looking at the floor, coughed a few times, even made his bare feet tap on the wooden floor. But some were already looking at him reprimandingly, and he decided to save the opportunity to thank him for another time.

Days later, they were digging a drainage ditch. The park behind the convent flooded when it rained. The Father Superiors had appealed to the bishopric, and the Bishop had spoken with the provincial authorities. But these procedures and conversations had been going on for two years, and the flooding of the park had put an end to the losing three entire harvests, and the water entering the convent and wreaking havoc on the basement storerooms. On more than one occasion, Maximilian had seen the rats emerge, fleeing the water up the stairs to other, drier, darker areas of the convent. No doubt many later found them in their own cells, or in the refectory or the main nave where Mass was offered. After each rain, the rats' gnawing could be heard behind the altar, but no one dared to protest. Everyone heard, but no one spoke about the rats. Only from the kitchen could one hear blows and broomsticks, even a few curses that sounded like demonic blasphemies amid the silence. As if it were the voice of Lucifer himself, who, after appearing amid the flames of the oven, also succumbed to the annoying gestation, the ineffable permanence and constancy of the rats. The voice of the devil in the tongues of the brothers who were cooking. That day, he entered the kitchen after taking off the old boots all the novices shared when they had to cross the flooded rooms. Brother Sebastian was the only cook, but there were two or three boys the city orphanage sent to help with various tasks: cooking, running errands, working in the garden. Some later entered as novices, but only those who had proven themselves steadfast. The rest ended up fleeing at the slightest opportunity on the road between the orphanage and the convent, never to be seen again.

"Holy crap!" said the brother. "Those hellish rats! May Satan take them back to hell!"

And so he continued cursing, after confirming that the one entering was only a novice.

"What do you want?" he asked reluctantly, seeing a very small smile on Maximilian's face.

The latter apologized, because he knew that Maximilian didn't like people entering his kitchen without permission.

"Brother Sebastian, we need fresh water."

"And don't you have enough in the whole place? Bend down and drink like dogs!"

It was the first time I'd seen him so furious, and at that moment Father Esteban came in, and Brother Sebastian immediately shut up.

"Forgive me, Father."

Father Esteban didn't do anything about it, grabbing Maximiliano by the elbow to force him out of the kitchen.

"They already told me that the rats ate all the corn we bought yesterday..."

"I'm sorry," said Maximiliano. He knew the rationing would last at least a week. In the meantime, they had to continue what they had started that morning. Father Silvestre had a brother-in-law who was an engineer, and one day he summoned his relative. After touring the convent, almost a third of which was flooded, the engineer had recommended emergency drainage, digging a two-meter-deep channel in the park toward the lowest area facing the river.

"I can send my people," he had offered, according to what some of the brothers who passed by as the brothers-in-law walked toward the door.

"We won't be able to pay you," Father Silvestre had replied.

"Let me do it as a donation..."

The next morning, the brother-in-law showed up with the drainage canal plans, but without the workers. No one asked anything; everyone realized that the offer to donate time and labor hadn't been a hit with the employees. Then the brothers-in-law said goodbye with a handshake, the engineer left in his Model T, and Father Silvestre, with the rolled-up plans, walked toward the brothers and novices, saying:

"Let's go to work, and we will offer our efforts to Christ Our Lord."

Everyone crossed themselves, then walked toward the warehouse, and Brother Andrés, in charge of the farming and maintenance tools, gave each one a shovel, a spade, or a hoe. Some followed Father Silvestre with the tool on their shoulders, others dragged it, others led the way as if presenting arms.

Maximilian carried a spade and was two steps behind the priest. It was eight in the morning, and they had already attended Mass twice, had breakfast in the refectory, and worked two hours hauling the wet merchandise from the cellar under the kitchen. He was tired, but the sun seemed to be just rising, and the sky was so young that, somehow, Father Silvestre's energy and determination rubbed off on him without a second thought. He glanced back for a moment, thinking that perhaps he could share a knowing smile with one of his companions, and saw Brother Aurelio, who was dragging a spade along the ground, even his feet seeming to drag on the uneven earth. Since he didn't have boots, only sandals, he was splashing mud back and forth. Some of that mud fell on Maximilian's face, and the other stopped, looking apologetic. Those following him

stopped, looked at him with disdain, and continued on their way behind Father Silvestre. Why did he generate that feeling in others? Maximilian didn't know. It was true that he looked thinner now, with a gaunt appearance he hadn't had before the previous week's punishment. He hadn't even grown a beard or mustache yet, and his baby face unwittingly distanced him from the other seminarians. The priests didn't consider him too bright either, and it was obvious that the reason he was there despite his age was because one of them was paying a favor to his relatives. Maximilian wondered if he belonged to a renowned family, but then told himself it didn't matter anymore. Many in the convent must be in a similar situation, some against their will and at the request of their families, others of their own free will and against family mandates. Both were like exiles, living in a foreign country, where the government was an invisible being to whom they had to pray, represented only by a crucifix hanging on a nail on the wall of a narrow, austere room. An empty crucifix, or sometimes with a man carved or molded in ceramic or clay, nailed to the hands and feet.

He placed a hand on Aurelio's right shoulder and, without speaking, winked at him with one eye. The other understood and smiled. The "thank you" was said without saying a word, definitively and without the need for words; only the eloquent silence hissing in the air of a busy morning, the insinuating and plaintive silence like the purr of a cat digging in dry mud. An absent word that enunciated the communion that Jesus Christ tried to penetrate the body and soul of men with complicated and bloody rites, the sacrifice of the lamb and the redemption of man, canons and dogmas that could hardly be described as accepted forever or completely and absolutely. With silence alone, God would have conquered the world in less time than it takes a shout, or the kiss of two lovers. He put an arm around Aurelio's shoulders and they walked together toward the future drainage ditch. Father Silvestre ordered a small dike to be built at one end to hold back the floodwaters until the ditch was ready. The brothers now seemed more enthusiastic than he had seen since his arrival. They came and went carrying lumber and buckets, always silent, but with hidden laughter and quick steps. Even Father Silvestre seemed younger, while Father Esteban helped out where he could, doing, as usual, any task. Maximilian exchanged tools with Aurelio; he saw him weak and tired, and believed the digging would be less laborious for him. He took the shovel and began to turn over the earth where his companion softened and stirred. The morning progressed slowly but with careful and prudent hope that it would be a different day, and therefore a memorable one in the life of the convent. The smell of damp earth rose from the exhausted soil, which had been producing old, tasteless fruit for a long time. The land around the convent was old, and no matter how much fertilizer they added, the produce it produced tasted almost like the same fertilizer it was fed.

He looked up and saw Brother Aurelio standing with his spade on the ground, leaning on the handle, looking at the earth he had just turned.

"Is something wrong, Brother?" Maximiliano asked.

The other man watched him for a few seconds before answering.

"Nothing. I'm resting a little."

Maximiliano didn't think he was telling the truth. The boy's gaze had been fixed on that piece of land, and he approached. He turned it over with the spade, and at that moment Aurelio grabbed his arm tightly. He was trembling and sweating more than he had been up until recently from the work they were doing, and he looked fearfully at the turned-up earth. "But something's wrong with you. Tell me what it is." He grabbed him by the shoulders and made him sit on the ground. They were far from the others, and even though they were staring at them, he didn't care. He rolled up his cassock, raised the hem a little, and tied it with the belt near his knees. Since Aurelio was sweating, he unbuttoned the collar. He saw the crotch of the boy's sternum, his white, hairless chest. He looked at his own legs, hairy and strong from working in the fields on Uncle José's ranch. What was it about Brother Aurelio that caught his attention? he wondered. It wasn't simply the need to protect him like an older brother, nor the solitude or the enforced silence of the order, which, after all, he had chosen of his own free will. And when he thought precisely about this, he realized the question he wanted to ask at that moment: if anyone else, besides himself, had heard God calling him to his ranks, requiring him as a conscripted soldier without papers or legal orders, only the word and the duty, the obedience due to the father and the teacher, the tutor and the boss, to the one who, above us we are compelled by reasons that are uncertain but too hard and concrete to be explained, or broken, which in any case amounts to the same thing. Reasoning disarms arguments, and therefore undoes them.

"How did you find your vocation, Brother?" he asked, as they both sat at the edge of the newly dug pit, on the still shallow mound of excavated earth that piled up on the sides.

Aurelio looked at him and seemed to be thinking. Maximilian gave him time; it was almost noon, and soon the bell would ring to call them to the refectory.

"I saw Our Lord, Brother."

Maximilian continued to wait. He was not surprised at first by the answer; he thought it was a metaphor, a way of saying that we all see God in the things of the world, his presence inhabiting every tiny form of plants and animals, even the houses and artifacts that man builds.

"It was six months ago, more or less. I was with my parents, sitting at the table." We live in a house on the outskirts of Cádiz, surrounded by uninhabited land and dirt roads. It's a stately home, which my grandfather built eighty years ago. At night, you can hear the dogs and the owls, never at the same time. First, the owls, around midnight, announcing the final fall of night, the inevitable sequence of spirits dancing around the trees. When they fall silent, the dogs bark in fear for two or three hours, until they grow exhausted and fall asleep. Then comes the wind, soft or strong, but with its constant whistling that recedes, leaving behind the icy air of every morning. Have you never seen, brother, the frozen and empty courtyard, as if there were no trees left, as if the only thing present were your own eyes, creating an image that you know in advance won't last long, because it's

fantasy, a reflection of life, an echo of the already absent sound, or the light of distant stars that died many years before? Phantom things, just like phantom men. Maximiliano coughed and looked around. The others had also sat down; they didn't seem to be talking, and even if they had, Father Esteban, now the only caretaker, wouldn't have reprimanded them. Aurelio stared at him, as if looking for a sign that he understood what he was talking about. Then he continued:

"That night I looked up at the ceiling and saw the spider hanging above us, and I also saw the other spider, the real one, weaving its web between the chandeliers. The heat from the candles didn't seem to hurt it; on the contrary, it moved quickly and efficiently. My parents asked me what I was looking at, and I was only going to tell them the truth, but just at that moment I felt a very sharp pain in my left eye, as if it were being pricked with something sharp. The pain didn't penetrate my head, but it was deep, right to the back of my eye. I lowered my head and groaned. My mother got up from her chair and stroked my hair, comforting me. I moved away from her because the pain continued and I felt increasingly nervous. I covered my face with my hands and rubbed my left eye vigorously. My father said I'd gotten dusty and should go to the bathroom. I don't know why I refused, nor do I know why I looked back up at the ceiling, where the spider continued to weave its web, longer now, watching it descend to the tablecloth, without my parents noticing. My eye hurt, it stung terribly, but I hadn't lost my ability to see. I could see clearly and sharply, without even tears, and I realized then that I had never seen the things in the world so clearly. Every edge of every object and element in the house had its own relief, its own range of colors, its own material structure, its exact measurement. I don't know how to express it... I knew, just by looking, what the purpose was, the message, perhaps, the solution and dissolution of the substance from which they were formed, as if substance and form were the foundation of a predetermined end.

He paused and furrowed his eyebrows, no doubt silently questioning whether all this was understood by his listener. Maximiliano understood, and, eager to know more, fulfilled his duty as a sympathetic and enthusiastic interlocutor.

"God is the beginning of all things..." he said.

Aurelio smiled, pleased.

"That's right, brother. Even in that spider. Because I saw it very clearly, despite its tiny size. I observed each of its legs, the ones it used to hold onto the web, and the ones it used to weave it. It was like witnessing the construction of a descending ladder at the same time as it descended. A miracle, I might say, why not, since it was in it that I saw the face of God. In the face of that spider."

"What you're saying is horrible, Maximilian!"

He nodded, shifting his gaze toward the sea. He felt like he was about to cry, so ashamed of having said that now. And not because he didn't think it anymore, or had regretted saying it, neither one nor the other. That was a different story. He was simply ashamed of Elsa's gaze, of those eyes and that body whose strength was a tiny glimpse of everything she hid, of the wisdom and wisdom that woman hinted at with her reprimanding gaze. He felt like a challenged child, like someone who had committed the greatest foolishness in the world, and there, in front of him, someone was now looking at him with infinite sadness and infinite pity. And in that pity, he saw love, he saw boundless forgiveness. He even thought he saw the sea more serene than usual, bluer even though the eyes were brown, because the color of the sea doesn't change, Maximilian told himself, no matter how much it's reflected in Lucifer's dark mirror. He exchanged glances toward the open sea and toward the enormous depths of Elsa's eyes, and the more he looked, the greater the contrast became. The night that advanced and the bodies sinking, the heavens that opened, revealing the moon, whose pale, ray-lit hands were preparing with the noise of rheumatic joints to lift bags, bundles whose contents he already knew. Soon the bones would arrive, and he would have to protect them all, and especially her, whose inland sea remained warm and serene in an eternal midday.

"I know, but that's what I feel. Someday I'll tell her what happened to me in Cádiz... but it's not time yet."

She placed her hand on his left forearm, his arms crossed, his shoulders nervous, and avoiding her gaze.

"Beautiful moon," she said.

Maximilian didn't raise his gaze, fearing as always the one he most wanted to see. He needed, like every night, to witness the tremendous event that was repeated to establish that the world was solidifying on calcareous foundations deposited at the bottom of the sea. One day, far away, he knew with certainty, the seas would disappear, and in their place would be calcium platforms, bones thousands of miles long with trabeculae and interior passageways where demons would move. And what, then, would be the kingdom of God? He wondered: the rest of the earth and the continents. But something told him that these would be flooded, the earth drowned, consolidating new bone deposits, new versions of the imminent future.

But today the moon barely peeked through the clouds, although it was full and promised to shine more brightly in a few hours, when night would take root at the ends of the world and grow, invading souls, penetrating the things of the world with bites of darkness.

"That's right." There was an uneasy, uncomfortable silence between them. She watched him, but he escaped her eyes. He remembered something he had read in Uncle José's library, about how in ancient Egypt, the moon was believed to have the power to blind anyone who slept with their face exposed to its rays. He wondered then if everyone was blind, except him.

"What's wrong, Maximilian? I'll listen, if you want..."

He looked at her then with enormous affection, feeling capable of loving her from that night on for the rest of his life. He knew, however, that all human love is fleeting, like that ship in the middle of the ocean. Slow and rustic, flimsy and weak in the face of storms and rain. The fear of the night was stronger this time. He began to tremble, or at least he realized he was, without knowing how long he had been in that state. A new layer of bewilderment and anguish, of shame, was added to his grief. "I'm going to visit the sick," he said, moving away from Elsa, fleeing her eyes as if escaping the cloyingly sweet hands of a honey-covered siren.

She stayed where she was, watching him approach one of the sick. He, without looking back, knew that she was now leaning on the railing and gazing at the dark water hitting the hull, not feeling, or perhaps sensing, the sound of bones now clashing loudly beneath the ship. He guessed the fights among the demons, the repeated nightly battles for prey. Fresh meat every so often, and every night the bones of God falling from the moon. Food for the bodies and material for the construction of the demons' sublime home.

Two more had died that night, while Elsa and he were talking. Her father told him so when he approached the group clustered around the new corpses. He told them to leave them on deck until dawn, so his family could watch over him for a couple of hours. They covered them with sheets, shrouded him as he recommended, and after making the sign of the cross, he got up and went to the next sick man.

He was a man his own age, though fatter and stronger than he had ever been. How, then, could he have been saved? he wondered. This man certainly wouldn't survive the night. He had a sparse, black beard, a wasted face, and pale, half-closed eyes. His long hair was hanging loosely. His face was pale, his forehead stale, his breath stale, his voice cracking, confused with the sound of the sea and the splashing of bones on the water. A faint, distracted sound was his voice, trying to utter a prayer that Maximilian hadn't even tried to teach him.

"Earth trembles..." he understood what he was saying, and he smiled.

"...et quievit, dum resurfacet in..."

Then the man interrupted him, finishing the sentence:

"...judicio Deus."

And with that last word, he opened his eyes and smiled at Maximilian as if he were seeing God himself incarnate, kneeling on the deck of that ship of the damned, in the middle of the ocean one night at the beginning of an uncertain summer. Perhaps he saw it, because it was no less surprising to Maximilian to see that the man's left eye shone brighter than the right, and when he noticed that he had finally stopped breathing, checking this by taking the pulse on his wrist and putting his ear to his mouth and nose, the left eye remained open.

He tried to close it, but couldn't. The eyelid seemed to harden before the normal time for rigor mortis. The eyelid remained stubbornly folded, like the curtain of a merchant's house that refuses to close its doors. Or a locked door in which we can find no cause for its terrible whim. Because night comes and the doors must be closed. We will go to sleep, and no one will watch the house except the inert, locked things, secured to the petty breaking point by the nature of their substance. Things protect us just as eyelids protect us from the horrors of the night. But the eye of this man, who had now died, could not be closed, and Maximilian interpreted this as an allegory of resistance to death. He wanted to free the soul of this sinner, who was determined to remain in a body that was now definitively dead, in a world that was expelling him, and in which he really had no further business. He made the sign of the cross, blessed the body, and atoned for all sin and damnation, abandoning his soul to God's judgment. It was then that he saw the man's right hand pointing toward the mouth, even further beyond, to the water. The hand, of course, was still and dead, but it had remained in that position without Maximilian noticing. Had he heard the splashing of the bones? Accustomed to the fact that only he saw and heard such things, he had forgotten that perhaps the rest of the world, like individual echoes of a common universal malaise, were small sounding boards where sound entered but could not escape, turning men into disturbed creatures who trembled like tuning forks. It would resonate for a long time, unless someone else gripped the metal of his soul tightly and granted him peace.

The eye continued to shine in the darkness on deck. Maximilian looked around and saw that no one else was paying attention to it. Some were sleeping, others were sitting or leaning on the railing, brooding. Elsa had gone to bed, perhaps. The father was still standing, smoking his pipe. The moon, tired of his numbness, his sore mouth, and his tired arms, simply threw out small bones, fragments, splinters, and dust.

Then Maximilian noticed that the dead man's left eye was developing like a photograph, taking on inverse hues. The negative of a very small photo, as small as the iris of that haunted eye. He leaned closer to the face to get a better look. The pupil had enlarged, and although the man had blue eyes, the photograph was in reverse black and white. He managed to see a figure he couldn't define. It was neither man nor animal, but it wasn't an inanimate thing either. It moved, or so it seemed to him, who in turn moved his head to see better. The ship also moved, and all those things—man, ship, corpse, and eye—moved like scales, or like the continental layers of the earth. Gliding peacefully as long as they were superimposed, but in constant danger of collision when they occupied the same plane. God, man, eye, ship.

The tetralogy of creation. The Passion represented as an endocrinological axis of cause and effect, of stimulus and secretion.

Order and obedience decreed by nature from the established chaos.

Because God was the tiniest instead of the greatest.

The centrifugal instead of the centripetal.

From the eye of creation, God extended his powers.

Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne wanted to see God that night in the eye of a dead man, but he only saw a collection of atoms composing the soul that was being released toward its final heaven. A physical fact, a biological process, a chemical reaction, like the very thought he was now creating. A series of words that not only represented an idea, but also concretized it in the physical fact of thought: God was the word and the fact itself, the thing-object, the result of an idea that could very well be destroyed by oblivion.

He touched the eye that had not been. It had wanted to close, it was cold and hard, almost like a pearl in consistency and smoothness. There, at the bottom of that eye, was something he still couldn't grasp, something that was both transparent and eluding his search. Was that, perhaps, what Brother Aurelio had felt or seen? The pain at the bottom of his left eye had been the beginning of a revelation. The dead shoulder at his side hadn't been able to tell him anything about it; the fever and delirium, the weakness and hunger were stronger and more lucid than the capacity for wonder and cry.

He brought his hands to his face and felt his own eyes, searching for pain when he squeezed them. He heard footsteps beside him, and the scent of Elsa's hair startled him more than the caress she was giving him. She must have thought he was praying for the dead man, or that he was tired and disconsolate. But he didn't show his face, not even when she knelt beside him and tried to take his hands away. "Always hiding your feelings, you... why do you hide like that?"

"I'm used to it..."

"Used to holding everything alone, like a hermit."

"Maybe..."

He took his hands from his face and looked at the dead man. His eye was still open, but now it shone with a white light that burst forth like a strange artificial light source.

"Look at that..." he said.

Elsa looked at what he was pointing at, but didn't seem surprised.

"What...?"

"The eye..."

She nodded.

"Yes, I see it. One eye remained open. In life, he must have been paralyzed."

Maximilian hadn't seen that in the few minutes before the man died, but he couldn't be sure either.

"Don't you see a glow, Elsa? A kind of bright light...?"

"In the eye...? I don't see anything." He's dead...

"I know," he replied sullenly, getting up and walking away a few steps. He immediately regretted his abruptness, because he didn't feel Elsa approaching again. When he turned around, she was walking away toward where her father had gone to bed.

He returned to the dead man's side and tried to close his eye, whose light burned him. Warm and cold at the same time, it had a peculiar virtue: it seemed to cut not with a metallic edge, but like the edge of a splintered bone. A hollow bone through which light passed, solidifying. Like successive deposits of calcium salts forming concentric layers around a hollow where air or a certain liquid, which he couldn't yet imagine, might later enter.

Then he lifted the body by its armpits and dragged it. Some people in the darkness on the deck saw what he was doing, but they said nothing, and he ignored them. It took several minutes to lean it over the railing, its arms dangling over the outside. Then he began to push it by its legs, which cost him much effort and great exhaustion. By the time he managed to do so, the body was hanging half in and half out. He lifted one of its legs, and it was only a matter of one more push, not too hard, to drop it over the side. The last thing he saw of the body was the flickering light from its open eye, and he could even see it in the water, like a lantern that was still afloat or a torch from a lifeboat.

He wasn't prepared to look any further, because he was absolutely certain that if he continued looking, if he continued trying to verify the moment when the eye would finally close, he would only succeed by following the path of the body, and even that he wasn't sure of. Following the same path was one of two alternatives; the other was to focus his gaze on the ship. The sea was death, approaching with the sound of the water hitting the bodies against the hull. The noises that called him to the nocturnal ceremonies, the moon rites that expelled the bones of a God who insisted on remaining at the center of everything: of the cells of man and the atoms of the soul. In the iris of an eye that would later rot away to leave a space and a bony hollow more important than all flesh, all muscle and movement.

Yes, Maximilian thought, I too saw God tonight, as if he were a simple bone chewed by a dog.

8

Maximilian didn't know how to reply. He understood what Brother Aurelius meant, but the way he said it, that blasphemous comparison that denigrated God to the lowest form of earthly life.

God as a spider. Even the very fact of the hallucination was an insult in itself. Aurelius, without a doubt, was sick. I could see it in his eyes, sometimes feverish, sometimes pale, lost in nothingness most of the time. He had left his work, not bothering to return to it when the others finished the frugal lunch Father Silvestre had brought them.

"Come on, brother, we have to work."

Aurelio didn't move. He continued with his sleeves and cassock rolled up, sitting cross-legged on the mound of earth he had raised during the morning. Maximiliano looked at the others, r if anyone decided to report him, or if Father Silvestre returned from the kitchen. He decided to approach him and force him to stand up. He grabbed him by the arm and said:

"By the Blessed Virgin Mary, Brother, work or you'll be taken to solitary confinement again."

Aurelio looked at him, blinking more frequently than usual; then Maximiliano noticed that his left eyelid didn't move, or at least not as often as his right. He soon abandoned the idea because he considered it more important that they be seen continuing to dig. Brother Aurelio allowed Maximiliano to lift him up and lead him by the arm toward the canal excavation, but he remained standing as soon as they stopped. He shook him by the shoulders and noticed his extreme thinness and weakness, the gauntness of his arms and the shoulder bones sticking out like arrowheads driven from the inside out. And that comparison wasn't incongruous, because Aurelius himself had begun those allegories, those fables with exotic animals, and primitivism or a new paganism seemed to emerge from the words they had both been uttering.

God and religion. Man and laws. Belief and despair. Faith and betrayal. Love and disillusionment.

Words they had been taught to use without any order or control. Words that defended themselves tooth and nail against any use one might give them, treacherous and slippery like snakes or eels. The same sacred words read to them every day were like insects with multiple legs, uncatchable, impossible to study through careful dissection. Insects with human faces, or the face of God that Aurelius had seen, ultimately also a face or a countenance like everyone else's. Because if God prided himself on anything, according to the theologians, it was having created man in his image and likeness. Therefore, God and man were two fragments of the same order, of the same original monstrosity, perhaps. A monster that did not denote deformity or abnormality, but simply origin, matrix.

Finally, Brother Aurelio agreed to work again. Without saying anything, he bent down and picked up the shovel. He walked to the canal opened at the side of the convent, removed his cassock, revealing his white underwear, long breeches, and undershirt, tied it around his waist, and resumed his task. The others saw him and murmured; some laughed and imitated him. Maximilian saw Father Silvestre approach to reprimand them, but suddenly he stopped, drank with a ladle from the water barrel, and returned to the shade of the eaves, but without sitting down, monitoring the progress of the canal according to the map he consulted from time to time. They continued working in silence, while the afternoon passed slowly and leisurely, like a worm crawling along the thin line of time with two abysses on either side and two nothings at either end.

Such was the sensation he had of time that long and heavy afternoon, so rapid in events and at the same time filled with infinite uncertainty, a paradigmatic indecision, bordering on the concept of dogma by its very strength. Even doubt can be certainty if it presses firmly into the human heart, an avalanche and an iron hand to direct the will if doubt is the biological mother of the soul it has taken captive. Only in this way could one explain why he decided to approach Brother Aurelio again to ask him how he was feeling. He had seen him stop for a few seconds to rest, put his hands on his aching waist, and stretch with a look of apprehension on his face. When he was at his side, he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and said:

"How are you, Brother?" "With great pain, you see me, but Our Lord accompanies me..."

"Without a doubt, brother. Our Lord Jesus Christ is everywhere."

"So you've seen him too?"

Maximilian didn't understand what he was referring to.

"Our Lord? Well, brother, not exactly..."

But Aurelio didn't let him finish; he grabbed him by the arm and dragged him almost to the edge of the canal, to the deepest area they had dug. They both peered in at the same time, one eager to show off, the other curious to see, without knowing what. Maximilian saw nothing but the damp, black earth, somewhat brownish from the sediment left by the stream when it flooded. But he saw Aurelio point with his hand toward the bottom, at a precise spot, which for him could have been any point on that bottom, because he saw nothing strange or peculiar.

"Look, brother! The Sacred Body!" "Aurelio almost shouted, and Maximilian then looked into his eyes, and saw that his left eye was fixed, bright but lifeless at the same time, like a pearl recently torn from its shell by the violence of the sea and thrown onto the beach. Something alive that denoted a history, like a miniature crystal ball, through which one could see the past and the future. But at the same time something motionless, detached from the muscles that give us humans the essential sensation of life, beings of flesh and blood attached to the physics of gravity. Where even thought is a physical event.

As if the eye had been torn out and replaced in its socket after exploring the cavity that contained it, or a part of that cavity.

The bottom of a cave, or the bottom of a well, perhaps.

"I don't understand, brother," he said, but somehow he expected to hear what he then heard.

"The body of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The body of God, Brother Maximilian," Aurelio said in his friend's ear, so close that Maximilian smelled the sweat covering Aurelio's face, and a few drops of perspiration stuck to his cheek and ran down his neck.

When he leaned over the edge once more, he felt Aurelio's hands hold him by the waist. At first, he experienced the confusion of that touch, the motive, whether equivocal or not, but undoubtedly unsettling, of those hands touching him in a way no woman had touched him before. Then, only later did he realize that the reason for the touch had been to keep him from falling into the well. Aurelio had noticed the wild roll of her eyes after hearing him, and the sudden faintness came only after Aurelio's quick reaction. Thus, it turned out that the one who seemed more lucid was the weaker, and the more illogical of the two was the more awake. Because they say that madness is lucid, that it is an exacerbation of reactions, or a hypersensitivity that allows for multiple simultaneous thoughts and attentions. Hence madness, the fragmentation of personality into as many facets as make up the world.

When the dizziness passed, he found himself standing by the well, hugging Aurelio, breathing heavily and still unresponsive, as if lost in the clouds of earth that had just been stirred up. "Did you see Him? I told you, brother, He's here!"

It was a cry as well as a whisper in his dazed ears, still blocked by the dizzying rush of blood that now invaded him after his momentary absence. Had he felt dizzy from what he heard or from what he saw? He knew what he had heard, but he didn't remember seeing anything. Perhaps his mind refused to acknowledge it, because Aurelio's voice sounded too sure, too logical and conclusive.

Now he saw him kneel on the edge and scan with his gaze, as if searching for something to hold on to. He found the ladder and went down. Maximiliano still felt Aurelio's body pressed against his, and he began to rub his body as if something were itching him. He was still dizzy and wasn't sure what he was doing. Then he remembered his friend's left eye, that fixed eye that, while looking at him while they were embracing, seemed like a mirror of his own right eye. And his own left eye contemplated the pious and sad gaze of Aurelio's right eye. The eternal division of man, the dichotomy in everything that concerns him. The eternal choice and the eternal fruit of discord. The perennial mistake.

Aurelio was now at the bottom of the well, crouched, on his knees, digging with his hands in a dark place despite the daylight. Maximiliano thought the other had gone mad, but his own thoughts had taken him to a level where he didn't even feel sure of his own sanity. Looking at Aurelio's bare back, the white skin now reddened and numbed by the sun he wasn't used to, he felt the desire to reach down and touch it, to rest his head sideways on that back to feel him breathe. To know he was alive through contact, because that seemed to be the only way since Aurelio's thin, weak hands, his long, skeletal hands, had taken him by the waist to keep him from falling. And yet, perhaps they had actually pushed him into an abyss deeper than the pit dug at his feet.

"Here it is, Brother Maximilian! Come down and see it with your own eyes."

It was like an invitation to see the face of God in a tomb. That's why he couldn't help feeling repulsive, as well as intense and irresistible, to

descend the stairs. He did so, watching the level of the surface rise as he descended, and this was a terrible and accurate allegory of his descent into hell. The demons were calling him, and he came consciously but deceiving himself, consoling himself with practical reasons while theological motives emerged from the realms of his logical mind, or the pseudo-religious state of his soul. He could no longer pretend he lacked a body with desires and instincts, one that could no longer bear the lie or the comfort granted by sleepless nights by the light of a moon that penetrated the window. No more hiding among brothels or letting off steam between sheets as rough as the tree bark he used when escaping from his room in Uncle José's house.

He descended, and His gaze implored the light framed by a frame of earth that grew ever smaller, until his feet touched the bottom, and there Aurelio's hands were waiting to protect him, to protect him from a possible fall. Hands that took him by the waist again as his feet left the last step of the ladder, feeling the heat of a nascent, approaching hell, and the smell of the damp earth that was beginning to burn.

Earth and flesh.

That was what he saw when he grew accustomed to the darkness at the bottom. Or perhaps it was the smell that created the vision of something resembling flesh in the disturbed depths, or perhaps Aurelio's hands, taking him by the shoulders, behind his back, to point out, with a movement of his head next to his, ear to ear, breath almost on breath, the place where the body of Our Lord Jesus Christ lay.

"There!" he heard him say.

Maximilian looked around, bent down to touch the earth. He dug too, as he had seen the other do, but found nothing but roots and stones, in addition to the blessed soil. Because that was blessed soil, he told himself, remembering that he was in a convent, that up there were the benevolent priests and the sacristy. For a moment, he felt relieved. He turned around and said:

"Brother Aurelius, I'm sorry, but I can't see anything."

The other closed his eyes, and it was then that his left eye, despite being covered by his closed eyelid, shone in the darkness. And Brother Aurelius crouched down beside Maximilian, took his hands, and brought them to the earth.

The four hands spiraled, and the earth now felt like sand because it was so soft and dry. Maximilian didn't look down, because he was fascinated by the other's eye. The four hands circled around and around, feeling each other's feet several times. Aurelio was barefoot, and he felt the softness of those feet, which he guessed were white beneath the dirt and darkness. He closed his eyes as a faintness invaded him, forcing him to sit down, while Aurelio's voice slipped into the darkness and his hands disappeared from the narrow spectrum of his vision. When he regained his composure, he saw only the brightness of his left eye, a single point on a moonless night. A small, intensely strong white moon. A moon struggling to emerge once and

for all from its daily burial, even though it knew that the next day it would be buried again.

He, then, would have to rescue it. And he reached out to touch the eye that now belonged to a head and a body lying on the dirt floor, partly covered and partly unearthed. Aurelio's body lay like the body of Christ his friend had spoken of a moment earlier. He shook him by the shoulders, felt his chest, and grabbed his hands, searching for a pulse. He put his ear to his mouth to feel his breath.

He was breathing. Brother Aurelio was pretending.

"Come on, brother! Your joke is blasphemy... I won't play along."

He was getting up to climb back up the ladder when the other's hands held him back. He was about to let go just as one of the other's hands took one of his and he felt the blood, and even though he couldn't see it, he knew it was blood. The consistency, the smell, the viscosity, and above all, the wound he was feeling. The splinters of broken bone protruding from Aurelio's palm. He turned and grabbed his hands, and in the darkness he clearly saw the wounds that pierced them. And he could also see that instead of a shining eye, it was a nail that generously offered a restless, merciful light.

A nail and an eye. That was all. And the voice of a presence hidden from the darkness, stolen from the uncertain light in an empty well filled with human rust.

The hands of God taking him by the body, seducing him like a lover who goes off to war and desires his last night of blasphemous love, of fornication and irremediable mockery, without any forgiveness, except for the pity or mercy that would only be born after the crucifixion, after every crucifixion.

He, Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne, did not believe himself worthy of so much privilege or so much humiliation.

He would not let Jesus Christ use him as a lover, nor would he surrender himself. He would not let Jesus Christ fall into hell for his sake. He was willing to do it for Him.

That's why he grabbed the shovel leaning against one of the walls of the well and brought it down with all his weight and all his strength, many times, on the head of the upright, yearning Christ who looked at him.

The next day, Elsa didn't speak to him. She spent the entire morning and afternoon changing bandages, talking to the patients, and demanding the doctor's presence. Maximilian didn't dare approach, and when their eyes met once or twice, he found nothing but indifference and disinterest in her

eyes. She seemed preoccupied, and any demand on his part And it would be nothing more than selfishness.

Elsa was wearing her usual plain black dress, which covered her shoulders and arms to below the elbow, where she rolled up the sleeves. She raised her forearm to her forehead to brush back her hair, which, despite being tied at the nape of her neck with a red ribbon, usually fell over her forehead, covering half her face and sensually hiding her cheeks and brown eyes. Now, from a distance, and amidst the unbreathable stench of illness and filth, the scent of the sea that tried to eliminate the smell of men as if they were mangy dogs being transported to the slaughterhouse, he could perceive the scent of her skin in his memory, the same scent he had felt while he was sick and she cared for him, caressing him, putting her arm behind his head, so that he could smell Elsa's natural perfume. The scent of her skin and hair, the scent of those hands that, despite the pain and illness, were almost an act of contrition, a surrender and forgiveness at the same time. A knowledge obtained not through effort and labor, but solely through affection, or perhaps through love.

But would she really love him? Or perhaps the right question would be whether he could love her. Because if it was true that he felt something he had never expected to feel for a woman, he also needed to acknowledge that he didn't know what she could really be thinking, or if he wasn't deceiving himself by trying to go beyond what he thought he was capable of.

"Elsa," he said aloud, standing among the sick people lying around him, perhaps at noon, or in the middle of the afternoon, as the ship continued its inevitable course, its spiraling cycle of days and weeks to which it was condemned before docking in any port in the New World. But no one heard him, nor did he expect anyone to. He only knew that an impending emptiness was forming around him as time passed without the presence, or rather with the growing absence of Elsa, so far away and so close at the same time. Within reach of his hands and his words, yet so distant due to the resentment she must be feeling.

And he sensed that he was wrong about that too. There wasn't such resentment, but, more likely, an indifference not devoid of love, like a mother who lets her little son's tantrum pass, leaving him alone for a while, but still watching over him and caring for him. If only that were it, he told himself, because the prospect of losing her and returning to solitude, however timid a consolation it was, filled him with anguish.

That night, he lay back against the railing, his back to the sea, looking at the stars and the moon, which tried in vain to hide behind solitary clouds. It wasn't time to watch the bones fall yet; that would be after midnight, perhaps later still. He hadn't eaten for most of the day, and he wasn't hungry, but without thinking, he brought a hand to his lips and, playfully, licked the back of it, savoring the salt, feeling that his body was beginning to become part of the sea, and that his own bones were like a ship, a boat capable of drifting and surviving storms and reefs, the incandescent days of summer and the rain of winter. A skeleton with its head as a prow, its

forehead held high, and its hands hovering above the surface, like a gargoyle. A demon to confront the demons of the sea. Because evil is fought with its own nature. And who better than him, Maximilian thought, the representative of all evil, the one who carries Lucifer in his entrails, in the recesses of his intestines, to destroy those demons who were gathering the bones of God, the remains used by that Old Man who should have been dead long ago, the sad, white bones that fell from the moon to be harvested by resentful and mediocre beings who planned to build with them the new timeless cities, the countries of hell. Not burned cities, but built with bricks forged in immense ovens, temples and buildings resistant to the weight of water and fireproof, as this was their very nature.

He had to be smarter than them. He had to combat the full power of hell with barely the strength of a spider, or like a woman looking in a mirror, who, wishing to recreate her entire lost world, only had a broken fingernail to rely on.

Over the next three weeks, many more died, a few recovered, and the ship's rhythm was marked more by these regular exchanges than by the surge of the waves or the noise from the engine room.

Healthy passengers didn't appear on deck, and only a few entered the designated, contagion-free area. The doctor visited the stern less and less, then stopped, as did his nurse, and only the orderlies walked the rows of sick people, taking notes, recording names, temperatures, and clinical status. They were more like statistics clerks than anything else, because they did little to alleviate the pain. They brought a few pills, which they distributed in a manner they insisted on calling equitable. It was Elsa who had to beg them to hand over the medicines.

"I know each one's condition," she told them, and they, looking at each other, resigned themselves after a brief discussion intended to maintain the appearance of her supposed authority in the circumstances.

Maximilian calculated the days remaining until the quarantine was completed using a diary he filled with short phrases that attempted to reflect the most significant aspects of each day. At least what he had done or had happened on the ship. Sometimes he noted: "Today two men, a woman, and a child died," other times, "I feel alone. Elsa hasn't spoken to me for days." Sometimes the crumpled paper from the first few days would tear from handling and humidity, and when he searched for his impressions from the beginning, he found nothing but the same confusion that had been in his memory. But if he suddenly sat down to rest, the memories resumed their form, or perhaps broke free from the invisible bonds that are the stuff of forgetting, and appeared in the form of dreams glimpsed in the afternoon hours or in the initial stages of nighttime sleep.

And they were invariably interrupted by the nightmare.

The nightmare that the moon tended to make less cruel and resounding, a kind of balm of mercy that would exert its influence on the stubborn

embryo of remorse. Because he was still an embryonic being that continued to grow, and he, still without a woman, had conceived him with his hands.

With his hands and a shovel.

But sometimes, too, Elsa came to interrupt his sleep, and then he was saved. Her hands shook him, as now, with more affection or with less anger. He then read all of this in Elsa's eyes, in the way her fingers caressed him, even though they weren't caresses but a call, a desperate plea to recover the body and soul of that man she had to see sink, dissolving, melting into the deck, absorbed by the demonic waters. Like a mother rescuing her drowning son, a lover desperate to support the too-heavy body of the love of her life, or a daughter whose father is falling behind, slowly immobilized by the icy prologue of old age.

It was nighttime when he woke up, his eyes open, staring into Elsa's face, whose head was hidden by the moon. She turned around when she saw him looking behind her.

"The nightmare again?" she asked.

He nodded, sat down, leaning against the railing, and invited her to sit beside him. The moonlight then illuminated them both, and he could see Elsa's pale yet beautiful face.

"You haven't spoken to me in a long time..."

She lowered her gaze and stroked the back of his hand.

"You're the one who doesn't want to talk, the one who withdraws into himself and doesn't share his sorrows. I can't communicate with you if you don't want to..."

"And what need is there to know, dear Elsa? Are you afraid of me?"

She stroked his forehead.

"You're a spoiled child who throws tantrums, who persists in bitterness, who seems to enjoy it."

Maximilian looked at her in confusion, and felt that she was the one who didn't seem to understand.

"Look around you and tell me if you don't have enough to be bitter about..."

"In any case, it's them, not you, who are justified in being bitter..."

"For God's sake, Elsa, tell me honestly if you think God is justified in all this. Look at the sea; it's like a desert where we travel in exile, unable to land." "But Maximiliano, we've entered the twentieth century. This ship has radios for communication. We're not alone."

Maximiliano knew that everyone is alone, because there are things that cannot be confessed. She stroked his forehead again, ran her hand through his hair, and lingered on his ears, caressing them. He leaned his head back and rested it on the railing, feeling the pleasant touch of those fingers that touched him so gently it was as if the sea breeze itself wanted to comfort

him, after having frightened and tested him like a punished child. Elsa was right, he told himself, every man is a child, but he knew that every child is born and dies in a desert.

"Why are you and your father traveling to America?"

"Because my father is sick," Elsa said. She paused briefly to look around, as if searching for the old man. "It's been over a year since he started getting seasick." At first we joked because he's a big fan of wine, you understand, but then I realized there were days when he didn't even drink and he still got those dizzy spells, even in bed. I saw him clutching his head or holding onto the edges of the bed. Then I realized he was telling me the truth, and I called the doctor. The doctor came one afternoon, She checked his throat and eyes, palpated his abdomen and back. She made him walk around the room with his eyes closed, even on tiptoe, while Eufemia, the woman who helps us take care of the sheep, and I covered our mouths to hide our laughter. Finally, we gave up and burst into laughter. My father opened his eyes and looked at us, bewildered. But that day and the next, he didn't experience seasickness, and he considered himself cured with the syrup the doctor prescribed. On the third day, the seasickness returned, and now he complained of listening to a radio while these attacks struck him, without understanding the language of the announcer. Sometimes it was music, but almost always he described the metallic, distant, but unmistakable sound of a radio broadcast.

As if someone had intended to make fun of us, we suddenly heard a radio playing from somewhere on the ship. Elsa and I looked at each other, and we couldn't help but laugh at the cruelty that a theatrical god, a Bacchus too drunk to blame for negligence or deliberate malice, imposed on us so that even we would laugh at our misfortunes.

"And what did the doctor say?" I asked.

"Nothing, he found nothing wrong. But just a week later, my father began to complain of a very sharp pain on the right side of his face, but this was nothing compared to what happened a few weeks later, when he lost the vision in his left eye. From then on, he wandered around the countryside and the foot of the mountains as if he were lost, searching for something, because he couldn't get used to seeing with only one eye. I called the doctor again, and he said we had to admit him, but my father didn't want to go to the city. A month later, he was walking and doing his things as if nothing had happened; he had grown accustomed to his half-vision." He only moved his head a little to one side, like a deaf person does when someone speaks to him, but now he hardly ever does.

"And the pain?"

"Well, it's lessened a little, according to him. Sometimes he wakes up in the night and paces the room, and then I know his head hurts a lot, but he doesn't protest. I didn't understand until recently the reason for his change, for this resignation..."

Elsa looked at Maximiliano strangely, and he thought she might be hoping he'd guess what she was going to say. Why would she suspect that, he

wondered, if she couldn't possibly know anything about him or his recent history?

"Father told me one day that he wasn't completely blind." "I know that, Father," I replied, but he didn't mean that he still had one good eye. "I can see God," he told me then. I thought he was joking with me, although he wasn't the kind of man who made jokes, especially at the expense of religion, even though he wasn't a practicing religious man and hadn't set foot in a church in the last thirty years. "At night," he told me, "I see it at night, when the darkness in my right eye is the same as in my left, then in this one," he said, touching his blind eye, "I see the human form of God beside my bed." I stroked his head and comforted him, because I was convinced he was going mad. I began to cry over this tremendous misfortune he had to face alone, but my father refused to be comforted. He spoke with complete logic, but what he said lacked any possibility of reality for me. "And when you see God, what does He say to you?" I asked him. "Nothing, daughter, He doesn't speak, He's just there, and I can see Him as clearly as I see you right now." Maximiliano listened to Elsa in silence, just like the God the old man claimed to see. It was a silence to which he had grown accustomed by the peaceful meekness of the Lamb of God nailed to a cross. Without cries, with pains hushed to the letter, groans contained behind clenched teeth, between numb muscles as tense as the knots of the wood that formed that cross. Muscles contracted by the lashes that Maximilian could still feel, punishing himself so that pain would be the messenger of his sins, the instrument that would warm his body to the proper temperature where desire and death met on the same level, on the same plane of reality as of conjecture. Theory and practice united by divine symbolism. The two united by the three. The third representing not only union, but essence, synthesis, and expansion. The representative that is what is represented.

The pain that transforms darkness into light.

That was what he had heard from Brother Aurelio, and perhaps what Elsa's father had tried to tell his daughter. "Didn't your father tell you if he saw the moon on those nights?"

Elsa didn't look at him; she was crying and hiding her face.

"I don't know, he didn't tell me anything about that." After a moment, while she wiped her face with a dirty handkerchief, she corrected herself: "He did say something about the moon, now that I remember. The eyes of God are two twin moons," she commented, but then she said they weren't two, but one, just as astronomers say the moon has two faces. One always visible and the other hidden from us. Dad then told me that God turns his head, and we see half of his face, but in reality, he only has half of his face. That's when I realized he was already delirious, because he no longer even spoke with a semblance of logic. According to him, God shows his left eye.

Maximilian then asked, only later realizing the importance of his question.

"The blindness of his left eye, didn't he mean it?"

"Yes, but he was referring to God's blindness, Maximilian. He said the Lord was blind from the day of his creation."

"The creation of whom?"

"God's, from the day he was born. Do you realize he's delirious? I nearly went crazy hearing that. Thank goodness my friend Eufemia accompanied me to talk at the city hospital, where they recommended I admit him. A few days later they came for him. Dad looked at me and insulted me for the first time in his life. I watched him leave in the ambulance, one of those new ones with a motor, white and with a huge red cross on each side, rattling over the rocks and making a lot of noise. He was in the hospital for two days. They called me to go get him. "Your father has nothing, just delirium tremens from alcohol," they told me. When he came out, his vision was still impaired, but since he didn't speak to me because of his anger, I didn't know for a while whether he was still being crazy. I left him at home, watched by Eufemia, while I went out to work in the fields. For a while, I thought everything would eventually turn out all right. It was as if he were bedridden, even though he could move and walk perfectly. I preferred that to listening to his ravings and knowing he was crazy forever. Sometimes I even thought the house and I were in danger; he might burn it down or kill me if I got careless. One day, I passed by the house of the old woman I told you about one day. I don't know if you remember her, Maximiliano. "The one who predicted the future?"

"That's the same one, but she wasn't really a fortune teller, just another old woman from the village, who was said to talk to the dead, just as someone else was said to dye her hair or own twenty cats. She didn't do that for a living, but people would come and ask her questions, and even though she never got paid, she silently accepted the gifts they gave her. I'd known her since I was very young, and to me she'd always been single and lonely, and she'd always been one of those good-looking, kind but mysterious witches. She spoke with an Italian accent and had an unusual last name, I think Sottocorno or something like that. Only when she got older did people start to fear her, because once she announced in church that a terrible disease was coming, and when everyone had forgotten about that prediction, three months later, an anthrax epidemic ravaged the region. From then on, she seemed to take this supposed divinatory power seriously. She rarely left her house anymore, and it was the neighbors who came to see her, even the husbands who had never paid attention to their wives' comments. But they didn't come simply as visitors; they came and went like a doctor's office, in other words, in shifts. Soon after, there wasn't a day of the week when at least ten people didn't enter that house. If anyone asked about her in town, they would say they'd seen her well, but nothing was said about what had happened inside. For me and the other children, the living room where she received people was always a mystery. She had animals, cats and dogs, some inside and others outside. She treated them well, many even leaving puppies on her doorstep for her to raise.

"She wasn't a bad woman, then..."

"Not with animals, but with people, I don't know. I mean, Maximiliano, she supposedly told them their fortunes, and that's not good at all, I think..."

"Why?"

"Look, life is a gift, a blessing, it's living day by day..."

"And what harm did that woman do by predicting the future?"

"She told the day and manner of death to whoever wanted to know, and many also wanted to know the death of others. You can have power, Maximilian, but that power also implies scruples..."

"And if God has no scruples, why should men have them?"

Elsa looked at him angrily.

"God is God..."

"That's rhetoric, Elsa. Words like sea foam, echo-less repetitions. What counts is what remains, therefore, what persists in the future. Seeing that future is almost like being a God, I think."

Since Elsa was still angry and didn't answer, she asked, trying to reconcile and learn more about that story.

"What was that woman's name?"

"Her last name is Cortez, María Eugenia Cortez, from Valladolid." Her family settled in the village many years before. Well, I'll continue telling you about my father. You're probably wondering why I did what I did, after what I just told you, but I couldn't answer. The truth is, I thought about her and decided to take my father to see her. I don't know what I was expecting, probably a miracle. A hopeful answer, at least. When we're desperate, we can even turn to those we hate or despise. I had nothing against this old woman, but I was afraid of her, or resented her, and sometimes I ignored her completely. My life had never intersected with hers, and suddenly it was me turning to her for something I'd never believed in, handing over what I considered most sacred: my father's life. One day I told the old man we would go see her. He stared at me but said nothing. He followed me slowly along the road to the village. I walked upright, proud, and silent, with a dog on either side; my father trailed behind, hunched over, staring sightlessly with those increasingly strange eyes, raising his blind gaze and sniffing the air just as the dogs did. We arrived, and she greeted us with a serious, bewildered face. I saw the inside of the house for the first time. It was just a small, dark room, filled with old, dusty furniture, piled high with books and papers. There were dirty teacups on the table, where flies buzzed and buzzed, sheltered from outside. We sat at that same table, she surrounded by her cohort of flies, we surrounded by the damp, rusty aroma of the house. Wood and iron, cat urine, old grime. That was the essence of the house, primitive elements with which she seemed to build the future. And it occurred to me that she really was a witch, tearing pieces of things to amalgamate them into a new substance that she would burn in her great witch's cauldron so that the smoke would spread throughout the world. A few unintelligible words

would undoubtedly be necessary to complete the ritual, or at least to give it the necessary appearance before the gods who would surely be watching. I looked at the ceiling, deep in its profound height, darkly inhabited by spider webs that I guessed were thousands of years old. Suddenly, Elsa burst out laughing, leaning on Maximilian's crossed arms. He smiled, smelling the scent of her hair so close to him that he felt dizzy, as if facing an abyss at the bottom of which lay the sea. He would soon throw himself into that, ready to dive and sink into that placid climate, whose consistency was like water but at the same time viscous. Salt and blood, he told himself. Lubricious fluid of torrid seas on afternoons that slowly die.

"I'm sounding gloomy, and that's not what I wanted," Elsa continued. "It was an ordinary afternoon in the village. Through the window of the house, I could see the mountain, my mountain, part of our ranch, our fields and livestock. The sun was splendid that day, but it set as slowly as ever, and soon the cold became so intense that we had to go inside and sit by the fire, even though it was summer." Inside, however, despite the mundane nature of things, the shadow of the sunset was stronger and denser, and above all, the dreadful smell, which at first didn't bother me, gradually made me nauseous, which I tried to suppress by closing my eyes and listening to this old woman's voice. Her way of speaking was a litany, even when she was commenting on the weather or telling me what she had prepared for dinner. There were family portraits hanging on the walls. People young and old. She weighed my gaze and said they were her children. "All of them?" I asked, because there were elderly people who I assumed were her parents. "Yes," she replied. I persisted, pointing to the portrait where a bearded old man was looking at us angrily. "My eldest son," the old woman replied. "I have had twelve children, all of whom have given me grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. Many have died now; the rest are scattered across the country. What do you want to know?" she asked suddenly, her hands clenched into fists in her lap, staring at me fixedly and with a complete lack of humanity. I was embarrassed for a moment and pointed to my father, who had been sitting next to me staring at the ceiling. Then I told him everything, just as I told you. She listened without interrupting until I had nothing more to say, then she approached Papa and placed her hands on his head. She lifted his eyelids as if she were a doctor. My father let her. I don't know if he saw her properly with his good eye; when he was absorbed in thought, I couldn't tell whether he was aware of what was going on around him or not. The old woman and I didn't exchange questions. I didn't tell her what I expected of her because I didn't know why I'd come, nor, I swear, did I even remember at that moment the path we had taken to her house just a little while before. I suppose she assumed the reason for my visit; no one visited her to check on her health or because they missed her. Yes, it was sad to think about that, but there are people who are a kind of Christ for different philosophies, be they religious, domestic, or even economic. They are the kind of people who, when asked why they will do this or that unpleasant task, which most people hate, they answer that someoneHe must take charge of doing it. The answer is so simple, it almost seems like a mockery on their part. And that's why, I think, we see them as strangers, we even come to hate them

because we sense a superior spirit that we are unwilling to acknowledge; to do so would mean acknowledging our smallness, our failure.

Maximilian had been listening to her attentively, sometimes with his arms crossed, his brow furrowed in extreme attention, nodding his head from time to time. But now, after hearing what she had just said, he wondered if that wasn't exactly what he was feeling. As if, by making such a comment, she were merely reading his soul or discreetly but profoundly rebuking him for his behavior, his stubbornness in remaining silent and elusive. But now he had to acknowledge Elsa's superior intelligence, that peasant woman who rose before dawn, herded cattle, cleaned stables, and walked the mountainsides as if they weren't a steep slope but a gently rolling hill. He thought of Elsa's legs and hips, how strong and shapely they must have been. He looked down, pretending to meditate, and imagined the body hidden beneath the old dress. He realized he desired her; for the first time, a woman aroused him without seeking or touching him, without forced kisses or rough caresses and rubbing that seemed more like steps in a mechanical process than a true desire rooted deep within his body.

"Are you feeling ill?" she asked.

"No, please continue."

"Well... the old woman said then that my father has a tumor in his head, just behind his left eye socket. She says it's inoperable." I asked her how she knew if she wasn't a doctor, and she drew a picture of Dad's head with a circle in the center, to the left, that took up almost a third of it. That was the tumor, she said, and operating on it would be like descanting it. I was getting nervous, so I insisted on knowing how she knew the size of the tumor, if it was one. "My dear," she replied, "I know because I see it." Then Dad smiled when the old woman's hands released him. I saw them exchange a knowing glance, and for the first time in a long time, my father's eyes were one; they behaved not like a couple on bad terms but like two lovers. Don't misunderstand me, Maximiliano, I don't mean to insinuate anything strange between them. The comparison is just a way of explaining that from that moment on, I believed what the old woman told me, because if my father saw something, as he claimed, with his blind eye, then so did she. And suddenly, everything was very clear and very easy, despite its complexity. She began to explain to me that there was a way to save him. In America, indigenous tribes know many ways to operate on these tumors. At first, I rebelled, expressing my disbelief, but as I told her, she spoke of the Indians as if they were a neighbor. "Take him to America," she advised. My father and I left that house, to which we never returned and will never return as long as we live. We sold the land and everything in it and set sail.

They had been talking all night. Dawn was rising from the stern, revealing the promiscuity of death, carried and driven, dragged across the deck by the arms of the disease ravaging the ship. More sick people had entered the forbidden zone. There were fewer deaths, and that was also a bad thing, because space was running out, and the epidemic threatened to

spread until the ship was nothing but an enormous metal sore, drifting adrift. The ship of Acheron was reborn like the phoenix.

Elsa and Maximilian gazed toward the rising sun and held hands. He was the one who made the initial gesture; she was the one who dared to kiss him.

"And you, Maximilian, why are you traveling to America?"

10

The strength of a body that doesn't know all it's capable of. And the iron of a shovel that doesn't break before human bone, that doesn't cower or flinch before the weight of flesh and the mercy and gentleness it imposes with its boiling intensity of blood. And also, a shovel that possesses an edge, the most lethal of that chain of elements that make up a crime. Deep down, at the origin, the darkness where the motive hides.

Maximilian went back and forth between those vague caves, from light to shadow and back again, aware of that passage and its motives, ready for the silence of thought, a silence populated by voices impossible to silence with any kind of death.

He looked at Brother Aurelio's body lying on the floor, his legs spread, his right leg bent, his torso halfway against one of the walls, his arms hanging with his palms facing upward, his fingers spread, his head tilted to the left, his mouth open, and his eyelids raised. He looked almost exactly like a religious image, like the one of the half-naked martyrs lying in strange positions while they were dying, their gaze in ecstasy, receiving the Holy Spirit into their bosom.

Up above, in the hollow that led to the open air—an inverted hollow, it seemed to him now, because he had the feeling that it had dwelled there in the pit forever—the sun had disappeared, heading off into the night, lost and astray. And he felt pity and sadness, and enormous commiseration for the sun, lost like a child, that tiny star amidst so many millions of larger stars. Then he began to weep for the sun and the light that was disappearing from the world that night like all others, but which was also the last night for someone. And he realized that he hadn't even given that to Brother Aurelio, because he had died before the arrival of darkness. Was that look he now saw in the dead man's eyes a cruelly concocted mysticism meant to punish his executioner, or a real symbiosis of that man's soul with his God? Was God in that well, dragging Aurelio's soul and ignoring Maximiliano's living body, as if the visible were the invisible, and the soul something more concrete than stone?

He heard Father Silvestre and Father Esteban's voices calling him. The workday was over. A head poked over the edge of the well, trying to see in the darkness.

"Brother Maximiliano, are you there?"

Maximiliano tapped the wall with the shovel, as if he were still shoveling.

"Yes, Father, I'm here."

"Leave your work, we're done for today. Wash up for Mass. Tell Brother Aurelio, too. He's with you, isn't he?"

Maximiliano realized that Father Esteban didn't even see them. He answered truthfully.

"That's right, Father."

The other walked away, and his voice faded, calling to the other brothers, immersed in the pits, and he imagined them emerging like beetles at nightfall, in search of food. Hundreds of black beetles would gather around a high altar in front of a leader, to hear the word of the scarab god.

Would they notice Brother Aurelius's absence that night at Mass or in the refectory? He could say that the brother wasn't well, that he had gone to bed, that the day's work had been too exhausting. None of such arguments would be a lie, just one of the thousand ramifications of the truth.

He put down the shovel and approached the body. He realized that what he had seen wasn't entirely true. Only his right eye was open; the left was gone, covered in blood, and that entire side of his face and skull were caved in by the blow. He didn't stop to wonder why he'd seen something different before, as if for a moment Aurelio's face had been that of a beautiful angel penetrated for the first time by the Spirit, like a virgin. He made the sign of the cross in front of that lacerated face, the face whose deformity he considered a liberation, an atonement for that soul tormented by pride, which blasphemed the figure of Jesus Christ with its worldly intentions and hidden obscenity. The obscenity he saved for the dark and deep pits, as if death and sex were a single bestial creature that the sunlight split in two to strip it of its power.

"Rexit in pace," he recited, making the sign of the cross over the shattered face, unafraid to touch it, staining his hand with blood, then wiping it on his cassock, already soiled with mud. And so, with his hands full of the mud that cleansed the blood, absorbing it until it disappeared, he began to shovel earth to cover the body. It was rapidly growing dark, and when he had completed five minutes of slow, laborious shoveling, which was taxing on his already tired body, he set the tool aside and climbed the stairs. Outside, the convent had turned on its lights, and the call for night mass was being made. He was the only one left to join the procession that could already be seen moving from the cells toward the church. The bells were ringing for the dead. Why, he wondered, and upon paying closer attention, he realized it had only been his imagination. Now the bells were ringing their usual eight chimes for night mass. The Angelus would be sung, prayers would be made for the souls of the dead, the Holy Father's blessing would be sought, a passage from Scripture would be read, perhaps the parable of the prodigal son. But if it was Father Roberto who would be reading that night, he would most likely choose the episode of the sacrifice of Abraham's son. Something that would leave doubts in the minds of the seminarians, something that would sow discord in the soul of each young

man, already plagued by the uncertainty between faith, vocation, and knowledge.

He looked into the well and saw nothing but darkness. There was nothing, only the intensity of emptiness, or it was land so dark it resembled the abyss of nothingness. Whatever the possibility, he was content to have created that scheme, that outline that sought to imitate nothingness, a place where anyone who looked would find nothing but their own indifference toward what doesn't exist. So much so that Father Silvestre appeared from the shadows next to the convent walls, and Maximilian heard him calling him. He didn't know if he was seeing him on the mound of earth, still seated. He heard their names again, and this time he answered.

"Yes, Father, I've just left and I'm picking up my clothes."

"Two minutes, Brother, I'll only give you two minutes to wash up and attend Mass."

He watched him go into the convent. He hadn't asked for Brother Aurelio. Whether it was luck or not, he didn't want to tempt the providence that granted him that, and walked quickly to his cell. He undressed and washed with the water from the basin, the same one he had used that morning when he woke up. It was warm and dirty, but it seemed cool to him compared to the heat that the agitation and fear inside the well had caused him. He scrubbed his face, and although he didn't have a mirror, he felt the muddy streaks on his beard and neck. He washed his hands, and beneath the dirt, he found blood stuck to them. He scrubbed harder this time, and the stains began to liquefy. The blood looked like new, as if he had hurt himself by rubbing himself, but once the blood settled in the basin, turning the dirty water a murky pink-purple color, he saw that his hands were unharmed. Not only clean, but they even looked beautiful.

Then he told himself he had done his duty, that he had purified himself while purifying someone else's spirit. He had freed Aurelio's sinful soul, his unacceptable pride in believing he saw God, and that redeemed him too. Like the soul of Christ through communion. He realized that now he was the one who believed himself to be as important as Christ. Brother Aurelio's pride, instead of disappearing, had passed into him. He knew that the Mass would be ending, and that they would come for him to take him to the solitary confinement cell, but now all he cared about was getting rid of his own blasphemous body, that body that offended Jesus simply by being alive. Even in death, his body would continue to offend God. He grabbed Uncle José's whip and began to punish his back, then moved on to his thighs, his shoulders, his face. He stripped and punished his genitals. He stood up and injured his feet. And despite the pain, he didn't scream or cry, he only made silent grimaces, and that was his gift to God, the silence that forgives and cleanses everything, the eternal silence where nothingness, instead of darkness, is as white as the womb of the Virgin. Listening to the seminarians' footsteps leaving the church and going to their cells, he guessed the footsteps of Father Esteban's sandals would approach sooner or later—or perhaps it wasn't him, but another of the orderlies, less

condescending, less lax in imposing punishments, because this was already the second time Maximilian had broken the rules. They were approaching his door. He opened his eyes and saw Father Esteban and two other priests looking at him with furrowed brows and a bewildered expression.

Maximilian couldn't get up, and he didn't want to. They wouldn't force him out of that submissive position; never again would he allow himself to be at the same level as a man, the same level at which Christ had once been. And he realized again that the stubbornness in maintaining his self-punishment was also a form of pride: everything smelled of pride and vanity in man, even modesty, even the surrender of everything. If he was punishing his body, it was because he valued his body so much that he considered it worthy of receiving punishment, and also worthy of redeeming himself someday. The body is the temple of the soul, he had learned, and the church a building where artifices boast of representing God.

Our eyes are vain, he told himself, our hands reek of pride, our upright backs overpower the world with boastfulness. And a corpse was perhaps the most powerful sign of pride. Without moving or speaking, it imposed with its silence the supreme aroma of vanity: the body stank more than at any time while it had been alive, a smell that could not be stopped, that traveled with the wind and lingered in the nostrils of those who had once smelled it. A smell whose presence lingered longer than silence, because it disguised itself using the same maneuvers used to combat it: it was like the scent of flowers recalled the smell of death. Cemeteries were gardens of blooming corpses. Are spring and summer, then, times of greater death because there is also more life? Are autumn and winter simply heir apparent kings who rule because their true king, life, will be absent for a time?

He smelled the scent of the priests' skin, the rough tinge of their beards on their necks, and the imaginary perfume of blood. Sometimes he saw a cut instead of the white neck of a priest. And the priests, a red line that attracted him so much that he needed to feel, at least once in a while, the warmth of some blade. Neither the fingernails of the whores, nor the daggers of some of his friends, nor even Uncle José's cold breath near his neck had come close to that need, that imperious physical need. Perhaps Christ would have felt that very thing long before being nailed to the cross, pain as a premonition, pain as atonement because it shattered the body into thousands of fragments while uniting it into a single feeling. The multiple parts of the body, forming a unity, dissociated and congregated successively in a simultaneous accumulation of life and death, of the construction and destruction of a spiral whose coils gradually broke apart to leave closed, permanent circles around the soul enclosed in the weak body of a seminarian, a young man with a dull mind and an excited body. He smelled Father Esteban's scent and hugged him, and felt the priest's hands embrace him, pulling him up to his height to help him walk out of the cell. They weren't taking him to the isolation ward, but to the infirmary. Father Rogelio began examining him with his medical instruments: the stethoscope brushed against his chest and gave him chills, the metal tongue depressor went into his mouth and made him cough, the forceps

filled with cotton and disinfectant passed over his wounds, causing a burning sensation very similar to fire itself.

"Water," he asked.

They handed him a glass, and when he raised his head, he saw that it was covered with a clean, impeccably white sheet. Suddenly, he heard a clap of thunder and was startled. The others must have thought he was waking up from some nightmare or bad dream he'd had in that half-sleep of feverish states.

"Calm down, brother," someone around him said, but he didn't know who.

He immediately heard someone open a window to let in the smell of rain, but that aroma brought with it not the memory of wet grass, but of the earth turned over in the drainage wells. He heard them talking beside him, without following the logic of the conversation.

"It's a sin that it's raining today..."

"You shouldn't lament it..."

"The water will cleanse the wells..."

"It will soften the earth..."

"What has been done is enough..."

"We will no longer be flooded..."

"The water will carry everything away."

If the conversation ended there, it was only because of the crash of thunder brought with the rain, which fell in torrents. He heard the word "deluge" amid laughter, and he perceived the scent of wine in the air by the fire, and the aroma of books, which wasn't exactly the Bible, because the paper was less holy and was impregnated with unholy odors. The aroma of urine and semen, of perspiration under the sheets. But where was that aroma coming from, Maximilian wondered, as he opened his eyes and tried to see what the others were doing very close to him, in the small room that served as an infirmary, but which, as everyone already knew, was used for drinking alcohol and having unauthorized conversations. However, he saw nothing but shadows and figures sitting around a table, some standing and others sitting, almost following the rhythm of the thunder and the rain, as if there were a hidden dance, a choreography perhaps, that the priests were unwittingly rehearsing, puppets of the pagan gods who, it is said, emerge when the forces of nature overcome the will of the supreme God.

Maximilian saw lightning illuminating the series of figures and images drawn in the room, sometimes like congregations of holy men, other times like peasants and fishermen clustered around a capital figure, probably Christ, but interspersed with these images, he saw naked men surrounding also naked women, he saw bottles of alcohol and a lot of smoke, he contemplated Mayan art figures dedicated to depicting orgies, rapes, and murders. He saw dead children, dead fetuses hanging from ropes tied to the ceiling beams, axes on tables, medical scalpels and clamps, forceps,

knives, and scissors. He saw white fabrics stained red, beds with torn mattresses, elastic bands, bones, many long bones. Severed hair of every possible color, straight and curly, entire strands torn out with pieces of human skin. And he also knew that the water would wash it all away with its compassion, its boundless mercy, its extremely benevolent forgiveness, too much for the object it was directed toward: man, that unfinished carving by God, a creature that should have been aborted by his behavior even before he was granted life, that piece of earth formed from feces and mud.

He looked toward the open window, and without seeing it, he guessed the torrent flowing alongside the walls of the convent, formed and fed by the rain that he could indeed see falling intensely between lightning and lightning, and that he heard even more clearly in the dense darkness of the late night. He ignored the real or imagined images of the priests in the room, and followed the path of the merciful rain through nooks and crannies, corridors, tunnels, and drains. He mentally listed the convent's roofs, the waterfalls, the areas that always clogged, the cracks in the walls. And when each and every one of these paths and obstructions was overcome, he thought of that torrent descending toward the first well they had dug during the day. The water flowed with its own weight into the deepest area, carrying with it earth and stones, even the shovels that some of the seminarians had left behind. I could hear, now, that torrent above the sound of the rain, but it was a sound that couldn't be confused with anything else, because it had the characteristic of something deep, like a suddenly occupied cavity, echoing the sound of the water with an initial echo that soon, imperceptibly, fleetingly, disappeared, to re-form in the next tunnel.

Until, in one of those many tunnels, the water would encounter a very weak obstacle: a pile of earth in its path, and also a body. And for the water, this body was no heavier or very different in condition or nature from the same earth it had been dragging along for a few meters before. Accustomed to sweeping away everything since the beginning of time, the current broke away from the obstacles and took Brother Aurelio's body with it, enveloping it in its whirlwind of small internal eddies, clots of mud that covered the body as if trying to heal it or staunch wounds that had already died. Like an ignorant doctor who ignores the signs of death, water considers itself more powerful than its own ignorance; it heals what doesn't need healing and kills what might still be alive. However, it is like time; what it sweeps away, it undoes and returns to the mud, it dissolves, it penetrates, and it introduces itself into its very substance. That is why water is merciful like God; it forgives everything because nothing is foreign to it.

He imagined Aurelio's corpse being carried by the current through the various tunnels, to the last one that emptied into the stream. And the force of the current then grew stronger, and the body spun and spun, twirled and thrashed against the walls, bent like a rag doll, and was finally thrown into the stream, with no chance of rest because the current there was stronger due to the rain. Soon it flowed faster but less abruptly, because the bed was wider and various parallel currents surrounded it, as if they now knew that it was definitely dead and had decided to make a watery shroud for it.

Then Maximilian knew that those bones would never dissolve, would never rot enough to leave traces somewhere. Even Brother Aurelius's hair would continue to float and sway, like seaweed, forming part of the nature of the seabed. The brother's blasphemous body and sick mind would persist in the water for countless centuries, nourished by the water to become a sea vegetable, algae, flesh that would feed the fish. And the fragments of that left eye would continue to see God even after death, at the bottom of the sea, the eye hidden in all things, in millions of fish that would feed just as many bodies. Aurelio's bones would become rocks where evil could settle, or perhaps those rocks were altars of petrified bones from many other bodies degraded by evil.

If the earth was the origin of man, who was born innocent, it was itself the destiny of good man. But water, the nourishment of life, engendered desire and perversion. All liquids, like blood and bodily secretions, were a whirlpool of chaos. Life and death, alternating, instability and disturbance. Only God was serenity and peace, permanent death. A rock, too. And that's why the demons camouflaged themselves, transformed themselves to imitate him, envious of the eternal peace of stones.

The bones of man were the closest thing to God.

The coveted treasures that the demons wanted to snatch from a God who was already dead, stealing his bones from their burial place on the moon.

The cemetery of the moon had only one grave, always open because it was never closed.

God's bones were defenseless, like those of a lonely, blind old man.

EXPLORATION IN THE RIVERS OF THE MIND

11

The sky of Buenos Aires was unlike any other he had ever known, although he had never left the peninsula in his life, not even outside his homeland, the province of Cádiz. His wonder came, perhaps, from the air, and he naively thought that perhaps it happened to everyone, as it had to the first explorers of the area, or to the first visitors. The strange air, cold and extremely humid, yet thrilling to the soul—he didn't know why he was now thinking of this expression—had penetrated them. He didn't say soul, no. He said body in a very low voice, beyond the voice of thought and far below an externally audible voice.

He looked to his right, where Elsa was bending down to lift bundles of cloth and food, carrying them one by one just a few meters, with the sole purpose of killing time while the ship docked. They knew the wait would be long; they might not even be able to disembark until the next day. They had arrived at the port almost at noon on Sunday, on the fringes covered by a

faint summer fog, a city that hid from the immigrants' eyes, jealous of its treasures, proud in advance of what they would discover when it decided to open its doors to them: to receive the ship between its docks like arms ready to love or crush. The port of Buenos Aires was a filter, and in that two-hour wait, he saw perhaps the most trivial but clear sign that they would not be welcome.

No one else seemed to notice the thin air, that peculiarity that was slowly revealing itself, as if the air itself were poisoned by the bad manners of the inhabitants. Even without having heard them, even without having seen them closer than a hundred meters across the surface of the river, moving like ants along the jetties, he had heard the voices of the dock workers with their peculiar South American accent. And even though they shouted the same instructions and said the same things as any worker at the port of Cádiz, the accent was sullen, and the profanities didn't sound with the expected intonations enlivened by familiarity.

The human voice is a song, Maximiliano thought; there is always a certain rhythm, a music akin to the meaning of the words being spoken. That music belonged to the man who produced it, but it had germinated in a particular land, a particular family, a shared history. The difference, he told himself (as he continued to lean over the railing, observing the city that grew before his eyes every minute, even though they were now still, as if, amidst the mist that wasn't mist but a kind of summer pollen that served as a diaphanous mask, the city was deliberately revealing itself, without fully revealing itself, like an actress observing the audience through a torn piece of curtain), was that the music Maximiliano heard from the port sounded arrhythmic, violent, and sordid.

Elsa approached him and called out to him several times, touching his arm. Maximiliano came out of his reverie and was amazed by the bustle around him, the commotion, the Castilian voices and the shouts of Buenos Aires, intermingling above the river, whose waters stank of death. "Will you help me, please?" she said, her voice tired and worried.

He nodded, though he didn't see the point of shifting bundles from one place to another if they wouldn't be getting off the ship for a long time. He soon saw that there were many passengers milling around their intertwined belongings. They had to be on guard against thieves; if they couldn't escape during the voyage, now at the port they only needed to blend in with the crowd and flee toward the harbor. Elsa looked at him wearily, as if asking him with her eyes what was wrong. Then, when it was mid-afternoon, they finally sat down on the bundles they had reduced their few belongings to, each on their own. Don Roberto was dressed in the clothes he had worn for most of the voyage, now washed, because he didn't want to enter the new continent as a dirty and ragged beggar. He smoked his pipe, gazing at the Buenos Aires horizon, as if it were farther away than it actually was, but there were no signs of myopia or blindness in his expression. Elsa had washed her hair, now gathered at the nape of her neck, a few strands falling over her forehead and cheeks flushed from the heat and exertion. Maximilian had been fortunate enough to receive a new suit from the ship's doctor.

"I am very grateful for your help, sir," the doctor had said, patting him on the back and belying with shining hypocrisy all the contempt with which he had treated him during the voyage. He had recognized in him the only educated man in the entire quarantine zone of the ship, and his gift was a concession to an old and antiquated politeness that he could only thwart at the expense of his social peace. Maximilian received the suit after a few seconds in which he hesitated whether to throw it overboard or return it politely but arrogantly. He accepted it without thinking, because there was no time for even a brief thought that was shorter than the burst of his memory. The suit reminded him of theA tan that had been definitively removed one day not long before, and he told himself that nothing was ever so definitive, that things returned in another form but with the same substance.

What did that suit mean, he wondered, when he held it in his hands and watched the doctor walk away with his nurse on his arm, moving away from the epidemic toward the port, his work done and accomplished, at peace in mind and spirit, full of anecdotes to tell in the city's café gatherings on long nights of leisure and recreation, after the equally long days at the hospital where he would recount the same incidents to his colleagues and intersperse them in his lectures, presenting them as life lessons to his grieving patients. There was no doubt that he would be just another storyteller for the next decade in a young city progressing at a rapid pace. But Maximilian was left with a worn-out suit, evidently unsuitable for strolling like a gentleman down any street in the vibrant city, but fit to make him feel different from the others who would disembark the ship. A sign of distinction, which would only demonstrate the difference with which others already treated him.

It was true that he had helped save certain lives, or perhaps he had done nothing more than console with empty words the bodies that didn't want to let their souls escape into the middle of nowhere. The body demanded to die on land, feeling orphaned on the water or in the air. Maximilian knew this with utmost clarity. Water carried bodies, as it had done with Brother Aurelio; the air carried the germs of diseases invisible to the human eye; the earth, on the other hand, received and sheltered the borders of the body, giving peace to the soul, now reassured to leave in good hands the vessel that had given it shelter. Where does the soul go, then? Maximilian wondered. He looked at the daytime sky for an answer, searching for the moon, white as a pierced, frayed cloud, a piece of cotton wool abandoned by a tired nurse barely finished her night shift. A nurse who saw the sun rise through the window of the room where she had been caring for a patient, and before her relief arrived, gave the last injection and threw the cotton somewhere, without realizing it. And that piece of cotton escaped through the window and rose into the sky, merging with the fading moon, the dead moon of the day, the shroud of cobwebs that covered it as the sun began to fulfill its duty.

The moon over the Buenos Aires afternoon didn't respond to him, because he could barely find it. He didn't recognize it, just as it pretended to ignore him. Another land is another world. Memory could be changed; the past was so unimportant, so trivial that it blew away like cotton in a prosperous

wind. The city was a clear example of progress; what it left behind was dust and smoke. Maximilian anxiously hoped so, but the futility of this concept, this conception of life, caused him a pain like an empty well demanding to be filled. Black demanded white, depth demanded height. Every hollow volume had to be completed. The physics of bodies responded to positivist logic. God sank into the abyss; God's body didn't float like ships. It sank into the sea, to the bottom of the chasms where his bones tumbled in whirlpools.

Soon he would leave the fragile surface of the sea, where every day and night he had heard the calls of the demons. Then he looked at old Roberto, trying to see the turbidity of his left eye, but all he found was an exquisite clarity, almost as if the mid-afternoon sun shone brilliantly in his pupil.

As evening drew to a close, the passengers on the lower decks, the healthy passengers who had never been in contact with typhus, disembarked in a long, slow line, along with suitcases and trunks. The difference between them and those men and women was so evident that he could only think of a silent blasphemy against God. While he watched them descend the ladder in their neat, clean clothes, their suitcases carried by servants, the women with their neat hairstyles and jewelry, the men with their canes and suits, the dogs on leashes, the children smiling and playful, isolated from the miserable gaze with which the sick men in the stern regarded them, leaning over the railing. Buenos Aires was no utopia, simply another world where the same differences would remain intact, the same crimes and falsehoods. Man was incapable of inventing anything new, Maximilian told himself, or rather, he corrected himself: he was incapable of tolerating change. Humanity was a species that only survived by seeing the same old paragons at hand.

He searched for complicity and understanding in Elsa's face, but she remained seated on her burden, indifferent. Compared to what was happening at the port. She only glanced at him from time to time, giving him a bewildered look, or perhaps it was just exhaustion. He knew she was angry because he had accepted the suit from the doctor. To her, it felt like a betrayal of the people she had dedicated time and care to. Since then, she had barely spoken to him. Now he looked at her like an ashamed boy, but that wasn't the exact image. He was proud of what he had done, and no suit could take away what he had achieved. That was what she didn't understand. Dressing well and looking neat and clean was almost a necessity for his spirit. He didn't deny mud or sweat; he only valued the good things in life when they came into his hands. Then, for the first time in a long time, he recognized himself as part of Uncle José's family. What a difference she could see in the pride in the sailor's uniform and the suit he was now wearing. Nothing more than nuances; only the impression the suit gave him mattered. He had left behind his renunciation of earthly goods and luxuries. When he had God, He was everything: food, clothing, and spiritual fulfillment. But when he lost Him, a huge void had been created around him, as if God were a piece of cloth that had suddenly been torn

and caught between the branches of a bush, and he had emerged naked and hungry.

He breathed deeply into the strange aroma of the river, proud to endure the stench of the surface covered with dead fish. He realized that their arrival had been the cause of such a smell, as they drained the sewage from the ship. From the docks, they sprayed jets of water to clean the filthy bow. It was the filth of the sick that had invaded the port and perhaps caused the death of the fish. And as if to affirm his thoughts, he saw several soldiers and police officers ascending other ladders, guarded by men in smocks.

"Elsa!" "She screamed, but when she looked at him in fear, the men were already on the deck, shoving and hitting those who approached them, demanding when they would be allowed to disembark.

The soldiers pushed their way through the crowd of men and women, shouting, "Stop!" but no one knew who or who was being ordered.

Maximiliano took Elsa by the arm and led her to where her father was. Don Roberto had remained standing and was now being pushed by the police who were trying to gather them all against the railing.

"Papa!" Elsa called, but Maximiliano wouldn't let her go alone in search of the old man. They both pushed their way through the crowd and the soldiers who were beating them. Everyone was going in all kinds of directions, or at least that's how it seemed, because Maximiliano was pushing and retreating, being attacked from one side and the other. He heard some women he'd cared for calling him, felt someone grab him by the arm, but he was only trying not to lose sight of the old man. For a moment, he saw him sink into the tide of people; he even thought he saw a bloodstain on his head from the blow of a rifle. Then he told himself he wouldn't forgive himself for letting Don Roberto die. The shame before Elsa's gaze would be unbearable, but even more so was the thought of not knowing what was happening in the old man's eyes. It was true that he was just another one who claimed to see Jesus, like Brother Aurelio, another crazy visionary who believed himself privileged, but this time there was Elsa and her love, Elsa and her body. And above this world of feelings and shame, lay the irrefutable logic of his reasoning: if there were more people capable of seeing, with a bad eye, God personified, why not him? It wasn't that he wished to go blind in order to glimpse God in the unfathomable darkness, but to understand, like a scientist armed with the tools of theology, the causes and motives of such a privilege. He knew this from the day he had escaped from the convent and went to explore, as if in a jungle where he had always lived and where he had read for the first time the meaning of every plant and animal, Uncle José's enormous library.

While the storm had still not abated, Maximilian escaped from the convent without anyone noticing his escape. The rain, instead of frightening him, seemed to have served as a protective cloak, a veiled curtain, an unbreakable wall behind which he hid his open heart, exposing it to the rain so that it would extinguish the ardor he still felt after learning that Brother Aurelio was nothing more than a skeleton dragged by the waters on its way to the sea. Why did his heart ache? he wondered as he ran through the rain, slipping in the mud between the mounds of earth he and his companions had raised. If he had done nothing but justice, there was no reason to feel sad. However, by taking the life of that boy who thought himself privileged to be a God had simultaneously thought he could turn off a light, close an eyelid larger than that of a normal human eye. Brother Aurelius had dared to die in almost the same position as Jesus Christ, but on a cross lying on the ground. Did this mean that he had killed Christ, like a Roman soldier, once again?

If God was willing to use a sick body and mind like Brother Aurelius's, it meant that God was beginning to show his weaknesses. Sex and God, men and women, men among men, displaying their lust, rubbing their bodies on beds with crucifixes and rosaries next to mirrors and the scent of incense.

Maximilian felt a burning in his heart, but his mouth was dry and his throat thirsty. He stood in the rain and opened his mouth so the water would drown him. But as always, he was afraid of dying, coughed and knelt in the mud, tore off his cassock and began to masturbate. And when he finished, he felt the viscosity of his semen mixed with blood. He knew he'd hurt himself, and that was fine, it was the right thing to do. If he'd ever punished his back, it was reasonable that he should now punish the organ that burned almost as much as his heart. He let himself fall to the ground, feeling the rain on his back, the earth in his mouth, with a taste strangely similar to that of Uncle José's garden in the days before spring. Rain and sun mingled with a curious prospect of reconciliation, attenuating differences, with the sole purpose of making him discover, revealing to his own mind events he would have liked to keep in the shadows of oblivion.

The smell of semen brought back memories of brothels he'd visited with his uncle, who'd pushed him and beaten him with the whip to get him to finally warm up to the whores. The first two times he'd gone into the room with him, and had told the whore how she should stimulate the boy; he'd even done it himself. Maximiliano felt his uncle's hand touching him, rubbing him until he was ready to penetrate the woman waiting in bed, her legs spread, her hot abyss ready to receive him as if it were the last road in the world. The best and last road any man would be willing to take before dying. And he remembered Uncle José's whip hitting his buttocks as he penetrated her, realizing that the blows excited him even more. The uncle knew what he was doing, and every time Maximiliano finished, he felt pain and gratitude, smiling at Uncle José who looked at him and caressed the whore's tits, touching his crotch with useless strength.

And when they left together, the uncle would hug him, drunk, unsteadily walking through the streets of Cádiz, back to the house. Then Maximiliano would help him undress and leave him in his bed, covered with a sheet, to go later to his own room. There he would take off his clothes, touch the dried semen on his skin, and fall asleep, thinking of the pleasure he had helped give Uncle Joseph, the kind Uncle Joseph who had been willing to shelter him and raise him like a son when his parents died.

Uncle Joseph as father and mother at the same time. The old uncle, like an impotent God, lay in the mud beside him, sharing his crime against the effeminate priests, but reproaching him for running away, calling him a fucking faggot. Maximilian knew that everything was body and fluids, that man was made of bones and rotting flesh. That Jesus Christ himself was a skeleton whose skull had two hollow orbits, capable of floating up if rainwater, like tonight, flooded his tomb. That's why God was wise enough to carry his son's body to the sea, to protect him from the worms of death.

Christ's tomb is the sea.

Maximilian raised his head from the mud where he had lain in the rain when a brutal thought revealed the following: a son buried his father, not a father his son. When the latter died first, the father's life was a living death. That's why God dissolved his own bones and threw them into the sea, into the son's grave, trapped in whirlpools, in deep chasms flooded with water, black holes that absorbed all light and sound, time and space. Darkness, silence, and a raucous laugh flowing from somewhere. Perhaps from memory, the hell of men.

That's why he didn't remember, in a kind of distorted and cruel blessing from a lesser, mocking god, how he had gotten home. He had no memory of getting up on his own or of someone else finding him and picking him up, taking him to the house where not long ago he had lived with Uncle José. Nor did he know how many days had passed, nor how long the lapses of consciousness that came to him like brief, misty bursts in that thick fog called oblivion lasted. The image of the facade of the house in the middle of the night, illuminated by lightning, the windows lit from within, revealing the figures of his uncle's servants. At that hour, they must have been sleeping, so his memory couldn't possibly be real. But Maximilian already knew that dreams could sometimes be as real as wakefulness, because they are part of it.

But who had carried him to the front of the house? Or perhaps he wasn't even carried on a stretcher, but in the arms of a strong man, his head swaying on the arm of a strong man. And it was then that he remembered that smell, the scent of his uncle's tobacco, so penetrating that it lingered on his clothes despite repeated washings, on the furniture and carpets, even his skin eternally smelled of tobacco. He was often asked where he got it, but he always preferred to avoid a concrete answer, either to appear mysterious or because he saw no reason to give an answer that was useless to the person asking. Only someone who had visited the same places in the world as Uncle José would have known what place, street, or tobacco shop

he was talking about. So he simply said Cuba, Puerto Rico, or the Philippines—any exotic place, always associated with sordid nights, street women, and the unmistakable scent of humidity and blood.

Now he knew who had found him. Uncle José must be somewhere around here; perhaps he himself had come close to the house in the midst of a fever, naked as he was and drenched in rain and sweat. His head throbbed and his eyes burned, and it was his uncle who picked him up—he was sure of it, he could smell the aroma of tobacco even now, in bed and covered with warm sheets and blankets—and carried him to his room, while the maids asked what had happened to little Maximiliano, to whom he would never cease to be a child. They came and went from the kitchen and the bathroom, carrying warm, dry towels and basins of warm water to wash away the mud that had gotten between his fingers and toes, into his ears, impregnating the spoiled white skin with filth.

He now remembered, thanks to the compassion with which memory occasionally honors itself, that it was the faces of the two old maids that had calmed him when he opened his eyes and saw nothing but the cold, dead ceiling, where the hanging lamps were heatless night suns, and when he turned his head, he saw the nightstands filled with medicine bottles, glasses of water, and containers of salts and spices. They had resorted to every possible household trick to relieve him and his fever, but he didn't consider the reason why they hadn't called a doctor. It was, then, the faces of the maids that comforted him at first, and the scent of his uncle's tobacco, which represented his presence even though he couldn't see it.

"Uncle..." he remembers saying between moans from his dry throat. The one he was calling remained out of his sight, but not his voice, which gave orders in a tone devoid of obfuscation or anger. His uncle's voice was sweet, at least that's how he heard it in his feverish state, soft but firm, saying things he didn't understand, but which sounded like consolations directed especially at him.

And when many minutes or many hours had passed, perhaps days with suns he hadn't seen or confused with the night suns of the intense hanging lamps, the maids stopped casting shadows around him, abandoned their whispers and tears, some fading away, others drying, and retired to their bedrooms. But before that, someone had said from the bedroom door:

"Go to sleep, I'll take care of him."

He had heard this clearly, and he was no longer afraid that Uncle José would hit him or reproach him for his behavior. The old man was afraid; he knew it, and he could tell from the trembling of the warm, calloused hands that began to touch him when the women closed the bedroom door. The hands rested on Maximiliano's chest, and he opened his eyelids and saw, for the first time since they had separated at the convent, the sallow face, thinner now, with a longer beard, without glasses, disheveled hair, and sweaty as he touched his chest to slowly remove the damp sheets.

"I thought you were dead out there..." the old man said.

He continued caressing him like a child. Maximiliano felt fine, blessed by time and perseverance, ready to enjoy the results of his long prayers for Uncle José's affection, which he had no doubt about, but which had been diminished and overshadowed since he was a child by his rigid ways. The old man caressed him as he hadn't done in all those years. Perhaps he took pity on him and his sufferings. He didn't know why, but it was pleasant to abandon himself to the night in the hands of the rest his uncle offered him.

Very slowly, he fell asleep, and because of this, the shock became greater. He woke up with a shiver. He felt like he had no sheets or blankets, but someone was rubbing his skin to warm him. He raised his head slightly and saw the uncle with his mouth on his crotch, and Maximiliano noticed his erection, but he did nothing and wasn't about to do anything. The old man only realized when he placed his right hand on the uncle's head, pulling his hair, trying to push it away without much conviction. Who knows how long he had been doing this, because he realized his pleasure was reaching its climax very quickly and his semen was leaking into the uncle's mouth.

The old man looked up, pulled away slightly, and wiped his lips with one hand. With that same hand, he moved closer to his nephew's face and closed his eyelids. He said something Maximiliano didn't understand, something that sounded like an obscenity similar to what he had taught the prostitutes to say. Then he felt the heavy, wet-clothed body lie down next to him, agitated, defeated.

Maximiliano looked at him from the side for a second, and saw more in that instant than in all those years of living together: the deplorable wrinkle of anger on his chin, the scar of sleeplessness in his eyes, the mud of his sadness staining his face.

13

He managed to grab old Roberto by the arm, just as a group of soldiers began to approach him, beating without looking at who because they were all rebels and sick, all vicious vagabonds who had come to America to infest the land of progress with their filth and their diseases. Maximiliano saw from afar the clubs swinging as he imagined spears would have done long ago in some old war, as shotguns must also be doing in the wars of today's world.

Men with weapons and men without weapons. That's how the world has always been divided. That's why he saw old Roberto's puny skeleton, suddenly defenseless and weaker now that he could compare it to healthier people than those he'd been living with for the past few months. Strong men compared to the old man's emaciated body. Then he thought that he himself must look extremely thin, and he realized that his lungs wouldn't hold up much longer under this hustle and bustle, the struggles to get or flee to some place he couldn't find. Get off the ship, perhaps, but to where? At the port, he'd find more soldiers, and probably jail, or perhaps something worse: death at the hands of some misused truncheon, in the

hands of some inexperienced or irate policeman, or from a stray bullet, or simply crushed by the crowd that threatened to spill over from the ship and tumble down the flimsy ladder to the dock. But he managed to hold on, first by stretching out with great effort, fighting against the bodies in his path, soldiers, police officers, or the men, women, and children themselves, all struggling to charge and flee at the same time. He heard shouts and orders from someone trying to calm them down:

"Keep calm! Go down slowly, we don't want to hurt anyone!"

Many responded with jeers and insults, but Maximilian paid no attention to them or to the voices shouting through megaphones from the port. It was after six in the evening, and the sun was setting behind the city. He thought, in a brief analogy completely unrelated to his actions, that the sun would crash and be destroyed against the earth, because in his homeland and throughout the long voyage, the sun always set, plunging into the sea, going out like someone extinguishing a campfire by throwing out small jets of water, delighting in the smoke and the fascinating struggle of the elements. The lower part of the sun's sphere touched the ground, and instead of seeing it reflected in the polished surface of the water, transforming it into a reflection of what it had been, without warmth or reality, but with the graceful illusion of mirrors, he saw it sliced into pieces, like an enormous mold quickly devoured by diners eager for cheese and wine.

With his other hand, he held Elsa, who, despite all the strength she had shown recently, now gave in to any slight push.

"Don't let go, my love!" he said, unaware of how those words emerged so spontaneously that he hadn't had time to stop them from coming out. He looked to his side, a little behind him, where she was, and saw her eyes watching him as if he were the only person there, alone, struggling with nothingness, pushing against a nonexistent wind, dragging her against a tide. Then he stopped long enough for her to reach him and put his left arm around Elsa's shoulders. He then continued walking with her at his side, protecting her, holding her close to his body as if she were a treasure and a shield at the same time. From weakness came strength, and just as two were greater than one, he knew he shouldn't leave Don Roberto alone, as he was threatening to break free.

He had reached the funnel that it represented the exit via the descending ladder. The old man was clinging to his arm, but two or three people, always changing, prevented him from getting any closer. Maximiliano feared he might tire and let go, but they soon reached the first step. He realized the old man was already on the step, ahead of him and Elsa. A policeman tried to stop them from going down, but the crowd knocked him down, and several young men held him down. The soldiers on deck tried in vain to keep them on the bow. No one had given the order to fire, thank heavens, Maximiliano told himself. There would have been injuries from blows, but the Buenos Aires customs authorities had decided to avoid a greater carnage. Don Roberto looked back and saw them. Maximiliano contemplated with dismay that cloudy and confused gaze, so dull and lost

under the sharply clear but aging sky of that Sunday over the port. The old man's left eye was shining, he could tell, and then he could do nothing but charge with all his weight and Elsa's on the idiots who were getting in the way and approach the old man to rescue him. Because Don Roberto Aranguren was being dragged toward a place he didn't know and of which he was deeply afraid. It was a look he was seeing again, but only now did he recognize, and it moved him with the nostalgia of a place that had arrived unexpectedly.

"Roberto, hold on tight!"

"Dad!" Elsa cried, weeping, moved by the trembling of Maximiliano's arms.

And the three of them went down step by step the flimsy ladder that with every step threatened to drop them into the water between the dock and the ship, to catch them before they reached the new continent. Because they wouldn't have arrived until they stepped onto the land hidden beneath the cobblestones of the harbor; they wouldn't have truly arrived until the soles of their boots or shoes, worn by work and time, were soaked with the mud of an unknown land.

Unknown, untouched by two-thirds of the world's population, cruel in its mystery of a destiny dreamed of and never fulfilled, by its promised goodness and aborted hope, by the breadth of its horizon contrasting with the narrowness of its refuges. America was so vast that it didn't fit in their eyes, so strange that their imaginations couldn't conceive it.

The three of them finally set foot in Buenos Aires, and were greeted by the shouting of megaphones from the customs office, the intense fishy mist from the boats on the dock, the rising damp that still lingered in the cold twilight. All of this was so overwhelming for them that they could only pause in their until-then firm, but frightened, steps.

There were many buildings and warehouses surrounding the port, none of them with signs, so they didn't know where to go. Those who got off early were pushed by the police toward a very large building with high doors and ceilings with Greco-Roman friezes. Buenos Aires had that almost incongruous immensity of modern cities, but especially at that hour of dusk, the city began to take on a cold and desolate hue, as sad and bitter as any of the three had ever felt anywhere before. Cádiz was an ancient and vast citadel, and Maximiliano was accustomed to the narrow alleys and old houses, but here in Buenos Aires, the climate seemed to dominate not only the mood of its inhabitants but also to have soaked the walls of every house with moisture. The docks, the customs building, the cranes that were at that moment unloading large crates from the anchored ships, the cobblestones neatly arranged in arcades that must have formed some coherent pattern for anyone who could observe them from above, the newly constructed automobiles that rattled and thundered with their engines, the horse-drawn carts whose wheels squealed behind horses leaving their dung so that the thin air would perpetuate it for many days on the streets. Farther away, to the left, they heard the call of a locomotive approaching

with its freight cars. The smoke eclipsed the little light that still lingered, as if reluctantly, eager to leave after that intense Sunday of sun and crowds. The sun was like an urban god who contemplated the busy lives of the inhabitants and, without saying anything for or against, let them know of its watchful presence, almost a stern but conciliatory conscience. Rather, the day, the daylight, which the sun represented, similar to a king who no longer rules but remains in his position, as a symbol of an old and outdated way of life. What was outdated could always be so without ever passing into a state of degradation, a state defined by circumstance, which is why the monarchy of the sun over cities was an allegory that every man and woman needed to organize their lives. The vigilance of their daytime conscience, and the liberation of their instincts during the city's nights.

In the customs offices, they saw for the first time the posters and decorations announcing that year's celebrations for the centennial of independence. The halls seemed to have been recently remodeled, the mosaics waxed where the carts rolled, pulled by men in white shirts and heavy black pants, one pushing from behind, two others pulling with hooks and pulleys.

Behind a high counter, there were many employees in gray smocks, glasses, and caps. Almost no one stayed still for long; they came and went with packages and parcels, shouting amid the muffled but intense noise of the port machinery, the cash registers inside, and the ringing of the bell announcing the payment of the required taxes and duties.

Maximilian wondered which office they were supposed to advertise at, and if it was the right building. On either side of him were Elsa and Don Roberto, who stared in bewilderment at the height of the ceilings and the swarm of men and women passing by. They came from the countryside, from a mountain town, and it was very unlikely that either of them had ever visited a city like this.

The police had let them in without pushing them, and he saw in their eyes a certain suspicion at their meekness. Had he been wrong to try to register voluntarily? He had heard warnings from the people on the ship before docking that they would be quarantined on land as well, but he didn't believe it was possible. There were doctors at customs for that purpose, to verify their condition and give them free rein to enter the city. If the authorities saw that they presented themselves peacefully and with their documentation in order, there shouldn't be any problems. He hadn't spoken much about it with Elsa, but from the little she said, he understood that both of them had their papers in order. He looked around at many of the typhus survivors and their families, being beaten and pushed into an area where the police were herding them to take them to jail. He admitted he felt like Peter the apostle when he was asked three times if he knew the prisoner Jesus Christ. He was afraid, that was the truth. The place, the immensity of that unknown city, of which he had seen nothing but the entrance, intimidated him. Perhaps it was rejection and resentment he sensed, or actually saw with complete clarity, not only in the beatings they received, but on the faces of the office workers.

That same expression he now saw in close-up, intensified by the voice and the disconcerting tone, with which a tall man brusquely demanded of them, with latent distrust and enormous weariness deep in his eyes:

"Documents!" while holding a pen in his right hand and a list in his left. She stared at his appearance and his clothes alternately, but Maximiliano spoke to her in particular.

He searched his suit pockets. Elsa handed her and Don Roberto's papers directly to the police officer. Maximiliano continued searching, growing increasingly uneasy with each second at the glance the officer was giving him as he reviewed the other papers. After several minutes of fruitless searching, he remembered he had left his passport in his now-missing purse in the middle of the fight on deck. Enough time had passed, the policeman, used to the tricks and schemes of immigrants, seemed to be telling him.

Elsa clung to his arm as she asked him what was wrong.

"I left them in the purse," he said simply, looking toward the distant, old ship, out there, behind the windows of the office building, like an already irretrievable, almost unreal memory. The only real thing now was that city in which he was a stranger, someone who had lost his identity, and he told himself, as if discovering and surprising himself with his own unconscious stratagems, that perhaps this was the best thing that could have happened to him. Losing his identity was losing his past, leaving behind what should be forgotten forever, and the ship and the sea had been the appropriate instruments. But he immediately imagined the pale moon still surviving in broad daylight, already gathering strength at the end of Sunday, and he remembered the sea demons feeding on the bones of God. Everything seemed to conspire to direct him toward a destiny, toward a specific end he didn't know, and there was the water to erase the past as it erases the footprints of men dragging corpses, or consuming the bones submerged over the years. Each day would be a new beginning, a recomposition of his mind and conscience, with only one doubt remaining, a restlessness that seemed irreconcilable with any kind of answer or satisfaction.

At the beginning and at the end was God. In the middle Nothing, only a multitude of paths he would have to travel simultaneously. Only the extreme points of his life were clear, each goal and exit point simultaneous, interchangeable. He was a swimmer who would eternally travel the length of a swimming pool, both ways. His security lay in this idea alone, if not in salvation, then in the immortality of his soul. Not dying, that was the main thing, the deepest foundation, the smallest portion of the root that remained of his faith, consumed by the fire of guilt and doubt, crumbling onto a bed of ashes from which nothing could rescue him. If God was capable of dying as he had, and yet the world continued to fluctuate on its multiple planes, more eternal than the primordial universe of which his religion spoke so much.

Then, like someone condemned to life imprisonment, he answered the policeman's last, discourteous, and peremptory order.

"I've lost them."

Elsa nervously came to his defense, looking from one to the other, simultaneously searching through his clothes and the few things he'd salvaged from the ship.

"Are you sure? Did you search properly? Look, this suit isn't yours, and you're not used to it. Maybe you put it in an inside pocket." And she began searching through her jacket, realizing it would be useless, stalling for something better, and knowing she'd just made a trivial mistake, but one that could make things worse.

"What do you mean, the suit isn't yours?" the officer asked sarcastically, and her satisfaction and weariness at finding one of those customs officials used to call undesirables was evident.

"The ship's doctor gave it to him," Elsa chimed in, but it was too late for corrections.

The policeman grabbed Maximiliano by the arm and led him across the lounge to a door at the back. Two or three more police officers joined them, but Elsa didn't know who to turn to anymore. They all seemed to her like ogres, there to arrest them. Her strength, which she had gained by tempering her body and spirit with the hard work of the mountains, had waned, sinking into a timidity dominated by fear. Her eyes began to weep as she went from one officer to another, saying, "No, please! Let us search the ship again!" And as she said it, she realized her naiveté, that kind of premeditated act that arose somewhere in her personality, and that could be called a woman's trick or a pauper's pitiful plea. She knew what they were in that city: mere dogs dependent on the mercy of the local masters. And when they led Maximilian through the door of the last office, watching him disappear behind the uniformed bodies, his body shadowed by the shadow of that office, which was untouched by the lights of the main hall, the fading light of day, the vapors of the ship, or the cries of supplication she was making, she heard the only question she had expected to receive from the beginning, from the very moment she had come to his defense, and perhaps even before, when the ship was docking in the port, and the two of them, strangers with no relation, arrived together, united more by the dread of their shared uncertainty than by any kind of love that was growing between them.

"And what about you?"

Elsa looked at the high ceilings of the Customs building, looked at her father, sitting on a wooden bench, absorbed and lost in his contemplation of his surroundings, looked at his hands without a ring, only his fingers of chapped skin and broken nails. Without fear, she answered:

"I am his wife."

She knew they would search her documents, verify the truth or otherwise of her argument, but until they corroborated the lie, they would let her wait for him, accompany him, and find out what would become of Maximiliano.

She waited for many hours next to her father, sitting on the same wooden bench, their belongings scattered on the floor after the customs officers had rudely and carelessly searched them. They found nothing but dirty clothes, which they confiscated to burn due to the risk of infection. So they were left with nothing, only their papers, their wallets containing pesetas that would be of no use to them until they could be exchanged in the city, and the anguish they wore like worn and execrable clothes.

Around two in the morning, after seeing officers and civilians enter and leave through the same back door, Maximiliano appeared accompanied by two police officers on each side. The three of them went to where she was. One of them said, his voice tired and his face haggard:

"Mrs. Méndez Iribarne, your husband, you and your father will be quarantined in the hospital. Be thankful we have so much work today..." And he handed her a piece of paper.

Elsa looked at Maximiliano, not quite understanding, then read the paper where Maximiliano's name was written, his surnames altered by poor handwriting. Antiquated and almost illegible. He knew that forty days were nothing more than a prolongation of the same torture to which he was already accustomed. He didn't remember who he had heard say it, but he consoled himself with the thought that a familiar hell is better than being a stranger in paradise.

14

The next morning, Maximilian remembered everything with a clarity that was at odds with the hazy wakefulness of the previous days. Entering and exiting sleep was disturbing to him, and for some reason his memory had decided to stand before him like an incorruptible watchman, or a judge holding the Book of the Law in one hand and a gavel much larger than the one usually used on the bench in the other. His memories had resolved to no longer hide themselves. Then he asked himself, consciously delaying revelation, the concrete, even tactile vision of truth and the past, what is memory, and what are its regulations? If he had known the rules, he would have played differently, almost certainly with the same results, and with the same dirty hands he had now, but his mind—that is, his conscience, his individuality, his person—would be different, and he would possess the necessary data to deduce the truth. And the game with Uncle José would not have been a game played by one hand, but by both; whether he fought or acquiesced, he would never know. But without a doubt, Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne would be a man, and not a boy lying in that adolescent bed, with sweaty sheets and secretions his body had expelled for days and nights.

Such events had been happening to him since he was very young, since his uncle had accepted him into his home as an act of charity in consideration of his dead parents. Uncle José with his uniforms and his sudden trips, his

comings and goings, his arrivals in the middle of the night or his farewells in the early hours of the night.

But what was troubling him, he wondered. Not the satisfaction of sex, since he couldn't deny it without insulting his intelligence. The disturbing thing was having seen his uncle's face for the first time in that moment of ecstasy. It wasn't him, or perhaps it was, but someone else, whom Maximilian himself admitted to having seen in his own face in the mirror, when he masturbated or had sex in brothel rooms. His uncle's expression was both familiar and unfamiliar, the serious, narrow face that reflected his military upbringing, typical of the day, ready to reveal itself in the light before witnesses, but also the nocturnal face that now appeared to him more and more often, because it was brought back by unleashed memories, memories released from a body that has now definitively died: Maximilian's body exposed to the fever in the street a few nights before after escaping from the convent. But illnesses incubate, the doctors say, they enter the body long before their first manifestation, and perhaps that's why, he thought, his old body began to die when he struck Brother Aurelio. Seeing his face in that grave, that imitation of Christ buried beneath his feet, he caught the germ of his own death, the one Aurelio carried in his left eye, the one Elsa's father carried in his head.

That same thing he had seen last night, and must have recognized many years before in Uncle José's face. Now he knew it without room for childish and futile disquisitions or inner torments: he saw the shadows of spiders nesting in his uncle's left pupil, while the light from the table next to the bed precariously illuminated him, lying between Maximiliano's legs, raising his gaze once, unknown, inconsolable, dependent not on time but on the fluids of the body and soul. The way an enormous god involved himself in the relationship between two people was obscene, and that's why it couldn't be the true God. God was dead, but his remains survived in small human organs, perhaps. Just like the calcareous reflections that can only be seen when light passes through surfaces that distort the rays, like the aqueous humor in the eyes.

"That's right!" Maximilian shouted from his bed one afternoon, when he had stopped crying so the faithful maids could come in and bring him his snack. "That's what it's all about," he murmured, determined to hide his discovery, afraid that his face would betray that he now knew the truth. Because he couldn't be proud of that; there was no redemption or hope. Only the pleasure and satisfaction of survival, of taking justice into his own hands, of walking the streets and sailing the seas like a warrior archangel, wingless, flesh and blood, sick and susceptible, but serene like a grown-up and idiotic cherub. Idiocy, however, as a container of transport, a mask, a passport to penetrate the intellectual circles of hell. He looked toward the door of his room, beyond which was the hallway leading to the library. Books were the answer; they contained the ingredients for constructing truth. But not books of sorcery, but the totality of human knowledge, the unhinged and diseased fruit of logic and its opposite, all the intellectuality concerning the human mind and its construction of the world since the beginning of time. They might even contain the way men built the building

of God, its rooms and mezzanines, its staircases, its basements, windows, doors, and rooftops. The hidden walls and dark corners.

The architecture of God's body in the anatomy of man.

Suddenly, he had the flash of a failure, the alarm signal of an absence. Not like a machine failing and announcing itself with a deficiency in its functioning, but with a light and sound alarm at the same time. For, as the maids entered to bring him dinner—and perhaps it was because of their intrusion into the room that he at first mistook that alarm for their presence—he felt a kind of buzzing before dizziness, accompanied by a flash of light and the concomitant vertigo. However, all these signs were merely symptoms that soon lost their importance, which disappeared before the discovery he made of his soul as through a wide-open window in the middle of winter, when the entire frozen being that engenders it seemed to enter, and not just its simple and transitory manifestations: the frozen breeze, the bare trees, the leaves wandering like incessant deliriums through the streets of Cádiz. What he saw was the state of his soul in that room inhabited by the ghosts of ancient germs, the same ones that time and again made pacts with the bodies of its inhabitants, creating contracts of illness as if setting up rents of greater or lesser duration, and whose outcome was the life or death of the tenant, and which in any case was indifferent to them, because they always won.

He wasn't able to feel anything, yet. He, like the germs that had now decided to retreat to the corners of the room, waiting for the opportunity to act again, had entered a period of study and discernment. Soon, he knew, a different kind of fever than the one he had felt those days would reappear.

They came in with the dinner trays, which they placed on the table between the bed and the window.

"Good night, my dear boy," said one, a smile like a flower on lips wrinkled with age.

The other, whom Maximilian knew was younger, although there was no noticeable difference between them, added:

"I'm so glad that the child Maximilian is recovered..."

"And he must give thanks to the Lord our God..." she said, crossing herself, "...and to his venerable uncle Joseph, who took him in that terrible night in the midst of the storm."

"And to his dear nurses who have cared for him day and night since then," said the other, blushing and provoking innocent laughter from her companion.

Then, without giving her time to say anything, they opened the curtains and let in the weak light of twilight, flanked by the sounds of the street and the dim opacity of the surrounding houses and buildings.

He stood up, felt his nightgown soaked with sweat, and went over to hug them. His arms embraced their bodies, one small, the other more corpulent, and he felt the tears on his neck. He said to them, knowing it moved them even more, as if he sought their complicity more than their gratitude, the need to buy them, to draw them to his side for any possible future event:

"I'm hungry, my dear nurses."

They burst into a sudden burst of laughter and ran from one side to the other to do everything necessary to make their young master comfortable.

"First you must change and bathe. Your nurses will prepare the hot water and dress you. Then you will settle into bed with clean sheets. I'll take care of that... Josefa, my dear, go prepare something fresh and warm for our little boy. What we brought is sick food." And they both laughed happily.

That night, as the city was going to bed, he was ridding himself of the filth on his body in the bath. He wouldn't let them come in and see him naked, even though they had changed him and helped him bathe less than a year earlier. This had provoked protests from Uncle José, but as with many other things, he had given up in the face of the old women's faithful tenacity. Now, for the first time, Maximiliano felt ashamed.

He got out of the tub, toweled himself dry, put on his clean nightgown, and went back into the room to get into the bed with its warm sheets that smelled of starch, undoubtedly freshly ironed and perfumed. There were no more traces of illness, and trays of food were being brought to him. One of them adjusted the pillows behind his back, the other placed the tray on the bed. They placed the napkin on his lap and filled a glass with wine from Uncle José's cellar.

"Is our boy comfortable?" asked the eldest, whose name was Alcántara.

He nodded, smiling, as he filled his mouth with the food she had brought him: fish with onion sauce. They waited for him to finish, each sitting in a chair on either side of the bed, discussing the news that had occurred during his convalescence. The world went on as usual; no one had come from the convent to ask about him. In the city, it was said that the building and the grounds were flooded by the river's overflow, and more than half of the seminarians had been evacuated.

"Imagine, child, the flooded altar and Christ's feet submerged by the waters..." Josefa said. "Our Lord continues to atone for our sins."

Maximiliano was thinking about that, imagining it clearly, because perhaps it had happened at that exact moment that very night, when he woke up and saw Uncle José beside him.

"What you said is quite true, my dear," he replied, taking her hand to comfort her, but he saw in it a brief trace of unease, not related to the shock of his comment, but to what she was feeling in Maximiliano's hand. Ignoring him, perhaps attributing the brief shudder in her soul to the habitual fears of her own old age, she placed her other hand on that of her beloved child, protecting it, and that trace of evil or madness, which she

had sensed so clearly when she touched his hand, vanished under the influence of her iron will, which she would call love and self-denial, but which was more like the act of scooping up dirt with a shovel and throwing it over smelly remains. Something physical rather than spiritual. Maximilian couldn't help but notice it on the servant's tender face, and he remembered what he had set out to do: search in the books for the concrete link between flesh and spirit. To search for and corroborate, if possible, the unequal struggle between life and death. He no longer knew which was which, whether the flesh was life or a mere dead object, or whether the spirit, which belonged to God because it came from him, was eternal life or as vulnerable as the flesh. The only thing he knew for sure was that the body contained the field of sensations in which he had to deal with such conflicts, and he had nothing but his flimsy scrap of humanity: the bleeding flesh and the brittle bones, the damaged lungs and the heart beating in irregular rhythms copied from the staves of dreams.

15

But what the customs officer had called a "hospital" turned out to be the Lazaretto of Buenos Aires. A building in the old town of a city that had just turned almost two hundred years old, and which, despite considering itself a modern metropolis within a country just a hundred years old, was nothing more than a large village expanding into the province, devouring neighborhoods, inserting them within its boundaries like recalcitrant nodules of poorly digested food that had become tumors that would never be removed. The city, which had given itself the air of a beautiful, progressive metropolis at the recent turn of the century, would have to live from now on with its ridiculous, encysted tubercle form.

The lazaretto was made up of pavilions connected by almost identical corridors and hallways, no more than three meters wide, with walls covered in the filth of men and women resting their hands on it like blind people, ceilings devoured by damp, cracked, peeling paint, and mold growing from the baseboards. But what the blind lepers couldn't see, or feel in their deformed hands, they could smell in their noses, still unaffected by the disease. But the building was a remnant of the last century, even older, according to what they were told when they passed through the wide wooden doors and were greeted by white-clad, wrinkled-faced nurses almost as old as the walls. The doors closed behind them, for they were the last to be transported from customs. Night had already fallen, and only the dim lights of the enormous hallway surrounded them, numb with cold. Elsa, with the pale, ashen face of a child, clutching the elbow of her father, older and weaker, almost blind; and Maximilian, serious, focused, determined not to give in to humiliation, not to reveal what he felt: the fear of being discovered or betraying himself with errors compounded by mispronounced surnames, haste in searches, confusion stemming from social and racial prejudices, and the petty interests of a

small town whose inhabitants boasted of someone who believed they were born in Paris.

As soon as they arrived, they were separated by sex. A nurse came to get Elsa and forced her to separate from her father amidst shouts and tugs. Elsa's hands refused to let go of Roberto's arm, and the old man, his lucidity restored after the long day, That had begun at sea and now ended inside an unfamiliar building, he tried to calm her.

"Don't worry, my dear, Mr. Iribarne will take good care of me." He placed his hand on Elsa's, patting her like a ten-year-old girl, and the grown girl, the frightened woman, cried, looking alternately between the two men, the only refugees she had left in the world.

She couldn't know what attracted her to Maximiliano, even though she told herself throughout the entire trip that he was nothing more than a stranger brimming with mysteries to be solved, sometimes with a sad face, sometimes stunned and lost in the immensity of nothingness before her eyes, like someone hiding shame or madness. What was happening with her father was as disturbing as what was hinted behind Maximiliano's gaze. Perhaps it was the charm of similarities, the congruence of opposites. She didn't know. She surrendered to him alone, and placed her father's life in his hands at that moment.

Since Maximilian was under surveillance for allegedly stealing clothes and missing a passport, two burly orderlies came to get him, but when he tried to free himself from their arms, the old man stepped forward to say:

"Calm down, son. Gentlemen, please let my son-in-law help me walk. These corridors frighten me."

His thick, provincial Spanish accent filled the place with a distant aroma, as if it were the breath of his land and his bones the trunks of trees at the foot of the Pyrenees, with branches growing inward, and he were a treasure trove of coarse perfumes: earth, mud, damp horsehair, dung, but also alfalfa, the scent of lilacs swaying in the wind, and the icy breath, sterile, brittle, and dangerous, the fleeting silence and eternal gentleness of the ice of the high mountains.

Then the men released Maximilian and simply watched him with their eyes, while he took the old man's left arm and placed it under his own right arm, strengthening the embrace with his hands, setting the necessary pace for Roberto to walk through the corridors toward the men's ward they had been shown. They said goodbye to Elsa, who watched them walk away in the opposite direction, under the high ceilings of the Lazaretto, invaded by ancient leper ghosts, where the silence of that disease, which affected, among many other parts of the body, the tongue and auditory nerves, was more ostentatious than any cry of pain. Leprosy irritates the nerves at first, then kills them permanently. Hence the silence, the isolation from themselves coupled with the separation from the world for fear of contagion. Maximilian had read something about all this in his uncle's library. Now he observed the old hallways, the smell of medicines, the ammonia of old urine soaked into the walls, the smell of dirty sheets, of

bodies. It was no longer a hospice exclusively for lepers; it had ceased to serve that function some time before.

"All infectious patients are admitted here," one of the nurses replied reluctantly to the question he asked in a contemptuous tone.

He wasn't going to give in or show himself submissive. For the first time that night, the thought, still seminal, of being able to escape before the forty days were up even occurred to him. He was afraid, despite knowing that nothing tied him to the past in Cádiz, to the convent, or to Uncle José. Only his memory, and he would deal with that later. He thought of the wide Río de la Plata on the city's shores. It was very close, and on silent nights, he could even hear the faint murmur of the waves on the sandy beaches along the waterfront. Even if he couldn't leave, he would ponder the moon over the river, over the waters of a river so similar to the sea that an underwater world was undoubtedly being built there too with the bones of God. He mustn't lose sight of this idea; it was necessary to see the completed dome-shaped vault or underwater palace someday.

He felt Roberto shiver at a draft of cold air that entered through a window that someone had carelessly left open. He gently rubbed the old man's hand, but his gaze fled beyond the windows, surreptitiously spying on the presence of the moon. It must have been three in the morning. It had been an exhausting day, full of violence and important changes. They had changed part of one of his surnames, but he didn't care. The customs officer had ordered:

"Name and surname!" with disrespectful violence; And he, controlling the fury that he knew would be unleashed at any moment if he didn't control himself, if he didn't think about Elsa, answered in a very low, restrained voice. He read the doubt on the man's face, and he was inwardly content with the employee's momentary limitation, who wouldn't give in by asking again. So he registered his new last name: Méndez. It didn't matter to him in the least. At the very least. If he had come to Buenos Aires, it was to be a different man, and if that entailed a different name and surname, so be it. He was no longer a priest, nor even a candidate for one, nor a young man who had lost his virginity long ago, even before knowing the meaning of the word. Now he was a man in an elegant suit that a doctor had given him because he saw a certain culture and education in him. He was the husband of a very beautiful woman and the son-in-law of a very good man who needed his help.

All of this was him in those moments when he arrived at the Buenos Aires Lazaretto and entered the men's ward packed with beds. He thought he saw a sea of sheets rising and falling as the men got in and out of their beds, sleepless, incontinent; matches being lit from time to time to check the time on a pocket watch, or to read fragments of a book, an old diary, or light a cigarette or a pipe. A sea in the darkness with the smell of sweaty men, sometimes of dead men, because almost every morning someone couldn't wake up anymore. A sea without boats, only men in their white pajamas like the sails of boats heading toward the barred windows or the restrooms. There were no other ways out for those who lived there: the

illusion of freedom and the illusion of brief physical satisfaction. In the following days, he would see many leaning against the bars, their faces between the bars and the idiotic look that comes from skin stretched in its eagerness to peek out. He would see men standing in front of the urinals in the bathrooms at night, sometimes almost asleep while they urinated, and also many moans and the smell of semen. All illusions, Maximilian would say in the following days, which extend human life as much as the illusion of a God. He heard short screams, moans, and snorts like the wind, but overall it was a calm sea with small waves, and there he submerged himself, between the beds, with the old man at his side. One of the orderlies stayed at the door, trying to enter what he later learned was the infirmary; the other accompanied them to show them their beds. The space between them was very narrow; they stumbled over outstretched arms, protruding feet, and fallen sheets and blankets. The darkness didn't help, so the man shouted:

"Turn on the lights, Juan!"

And the high beams came on, dazzling everyone's eyes. Many shouted and swore, others got up, thinking it was already daylight.

"Go to bed, damn it, it's still night!"

Then the distracted, usually also submissive, covered themselves again. Some rubbed their eyes or looked at the new arrivals with sullen expressions.

The beds weren't made, so they both went to bed in the clothes they were wearing. They turned off the lights, and the true chill of the night began. He felt Roberto shivering amid the coughing of many others. He got up and lay down next to his father-in-law, rubbing his arms to keep him warm. Because that's what he was, and that's how he felt: his father-in-law. He wondered if he loved Elsa, and answered that he did, a fact clear and simple for the first time in his life, a physical need without shame and a spiritual need without detours, without twists or quirks. No complex theory informed the love he now felt, no theories regarding the value, foundation, or origins of such a feeling. No theology or psyche, no history to analyze. His life began with that love as simple as that woman's hair, like her cheek and her scent, as simple as the pleasure of cradling himself against her body without thinking.

Without the theories of God.

Without God.

The days at the lazaretto weren't as bad as they had initially thought. The first day they felt lost in the new routine and the new rules they had to follow, but it was almost like still being on the ship, albeit with more comforts. They consoled themselves with the thought, especially Elsa, that at least for now they were avoiding the harshness of the city, and the place was a closed environment in which they would know how to navigate when they felt more comfortable. The nurses stopped bothering them, and they

especially lessened their vigilant pressure on Maximilian when they saw he wasn't causing any trouble. But Maximilian's meekness was forced by the care Roberto required. If he had been alone, he might have fled at the first opportunity. He had seen that the main door was guarded by only one policeman, and the nurses, strong as they were, could have evaded them if he wanted. But he had grown attached to his father-in-law, and he had also promised Elsa that he would look after him. Their relationship with the other guests, almost all of them permanent, was volatile. They met some they knew on the ship, but discovered that after a few days they tried to avoid them. They distrusted Roberto and his strange illness, Elsa believed, because rumors had spread about the curiosities. He had terrible visions, and although the old man hadn't spoken to anyone about them, Maximiliano had heard him talking in his sleep at night. On those occasions, he would get up and try to soothe his sleep without waking him, speaking to him in a low, affectionate voice. But he had heard the protests of the others who wanted to sleep, and later the surreptitious and distrustful glances of their bedmates.

Then the rumor spread that the Méndez Iribarnes, as they were called from the first day, were crazy. Only the women supported Elsa, a few, because they didn't speak to the men or even look at them. Elsa saw how some of them crossed themselves when they passed by them, and the men cast angry and defiant glances at Maximiliano.

"Don't pay attention to them," he had said when Elsa told him her fears. He, however, felt that sign of the cross like a slap aimed directly at his face. There are people who know without knowing, he told himself, who act with certainty because of what is usually called chance. Those who think they know us don't know us, and strangers punish at the very center and most painful of wounds.

There was a chapel in the lazaretto. He deliberately avoided visiting it for a while, despite Elsa's request, who went there almost every day to pray for her father's health. He saw her enter through the narrow door at the end of a long corridor at the back of the building. He saw her disappear into the darkness of that path of echoes that bounced off the peeling walls and flaked the paint into fragments that would never fully fall until the building was demolished. The building was aging like a man, and Elsa knew it, which is why she walked through the corridor as if arm in arm with her aging father, and visited the chapel of ancient images, made of clay molded by the Indians under the supervision of the Jesuits in the 17th and 18th centuries. Broken statues, some without hands, others without heads, and yet Elsa prayed to them, even without knowing which saint it was. She told him all this, because he would remain at the entrance to the corridor when she entered and wait for her to leave, glimpsing, during the sometimes long wait, the figures drawn in the shadows behind the distant entrance. The shadows played on the floors, and through the narrow space he could guess the figures of saints and virgins.

Every night he met with Elsa in the central courtyard, until the hour they were allowed. They talked about what they would do when they left. Maximilian told her they would go to the port to find out when the first

boat would leave for the coast. Elsa agreed, but she wanted to acclimatize to the city, find a room in a boarding house. The women had told her that there were plenty of rooms for immigrants in the La Boca neighborhood. But Maximiliano was surprised by her casualness.

"But don't you want to cure your father?" he asked, knowing he was hurting her.

She looked away, obviously hurt, but answered:

"Of course I do, but the Indian thing, now that I'm here, seems so fanciful."

She took a deep breath, leaning her back against the cold wall of the courtyard.

"I'd like to take him to a good hospital first, see what the doctors tell me."

"But that woman..."

"She was a witch, a fraud, or both." I can't believe I believed him at the time. I was desperate, and... I don't know... now that I'm here, with this clear sky, these flat expanses, no mountains or nooks to hide in, it scares me and gives me confidence at the same time. Shadows don't exist on this earth, don't you think?

"There are shadows everywhere, my dear..." It was the first time he'd called her that, and she looked at him in a way that felt like the greatest gift she'd ever received. For that look, she would have definitely given up all the books she'd ever read and all the ones she'd ever read for the rest of her life.

Slightly embarrassed at having shown his feelings, he continued:

"...and I'm increasingly convinced that your father's problem can't be solved by traditional medical science." Knowing that Elsa didn't understand the reasons for his statement, he tried to explain himself while simultaneously hiding his true reasons.

"I hear him talking every night in my dreams." Sometimes they're serene, as if he were praying; other times he's agitated and desperate, then he wakes up and looks at me, and I know he can't see me anymore. The cancer is very advanced, I think, and the only thing the doctors will do is give him up for dead and lock him up in a hospital to let him die.

Why lie like that? Why hide from the woman he loved? Because not even those who love us can forgive us for certain things. Such as seeing in the old man's left eye the same thing he saw in Aurelio's left eye that day they were digging the ditch at the seminary. The image of Christ, supported by the word of the An old man like an old resurrected Christ and a resident of a small town, a Christ retired from his office job at an old printing press or notary's office, destined to walk the streets of Buenos Aires in search of his apostles to go for a drink and coffee at a corner bar and chat about the old days before the Passion.

Those nights, he said goodbye to Elsa with a kiss on the cheek, without mentioning the affectionate terms they had used, like a married couple who

take for granted both affection and the words and actions that accompany it. Then he would sit next to Roberto and help him undress, go to the bathroom, put on the pajamas donated by the Ladies of Charity, and go to bed. He often watched him fall asleep with his eyes open, because it was true that when night fell, the real darkness was confused with the growing darkness of his eyes, and he couldn't distinguish shapes or figures. Those nights, Maximilian tried to see the image in Roberto's transparent eye, but it eluded him like the shadow of a ghost. That's why he got up when almost everyone was already asleep and went to the barred window. He anxiously searched for the moon behind the low surrounding buildings, behind the storm clouds or the fog. When he found it, he calmed down, because he saw its bone structure, the bones and their shadows on the lunar surface, the yellow or white bones, as if the birth and death of God were an endless cycle. Yellow with jaundice, cirrhosis, biliary disease, gallstones, stones, cancer, or necrosis spreading irremediably. And then the pale death reflected back, staining the bones, dissolving their trabeculae into dust and lime to fertilize the earth.

But God's bones were so dry that nothing would ever grow from them. That's why they fell into the sea, as if by hydrating themselves they would recover their structure. The bones of God were, perhaps, the very bones of Satan.

Cycles. Interlocking circles.

The Greek number pi.

16

He got up before the maids came to wake him. It was obvious he had to do it before dawn, because now that the old maids had seen him recover, they would no longer leave him alone with their care. Not a single minute of his life had passed without them hovering over him, watching over him, protecting him, anticipating his needs. And it had been a beautiful and comfortable life, but also one of suffocation and boredom, a passage almost like a dream between rising from one to passing into a deeper one, between sleepy meals and drinks, between warm clothing and hearth fires, between languid walks in the sun and the long, lonely summer afternoons lying on the garden lawn watching the water of the nearby stream pass by almost unnoticed, as he was unnoticedly letting his own life pass by. And in the midst of those afternoon reveries, as he dressed in the fading darkness of dawn, he remembered Uncle José's visits. Her hands caressing him in childhood, tucking him in, covering him with blankets and his own body. Perhaps because the warmth of the hearth had accustomed him to considering caresses as belonging to the world of dreams, not to invade the consciousness of the day; that was what his uncle's brusque manner, his hoarse, and at times harsh, almost high-pitched voice, had always instilled in him during the middays when they ate lunch alone in the dining room of the mansion.

At first, there was the silence, interrupted only by the clanging of dishes, by the hidden voices of the maids behind the doors, challenging each other, vying for the affection and fidelity of that man and that child who were the object of their lives. Lives that were worth no more than the walls of that house, and that would crumble long before this one, to be absorbed, mutated perhaps, transformed by time into lime dust soaked into the baseboards of the old house in Cádiz. Then came Uncle José's teaching, the rules he made him repeat every morning, the prayers he had learned in catechism, and after the boy repeated what he knew, with greater or lesser skill, came Uncle José's words, his voice agitated by a whirlwind of anger, of demanded justice, like a tempest that dominated the rest of the day until it became the essence of sunlight, until it ended up transforming Maximiliano's soul into a vertiginous impetus of fear of light, of fear of time that passes slowly and delays the arrival, the bliss of the night. It wasn't fear of the day, really, it wasn't fear of violence, but a respect trapped within the four walls, a reverence that had grown anchored, fossilized in his young soul, engendered by his parents when they conceived him on a distant Spanish night. It was as if two lives inhabited him: the past with his dead parents, whom his uncle never mentioned, the zone of ignorance, of brutality, of shame, of an elementality bordering on the profane, and the present, the place closest to earthly paradise. A Paradise that Uncle Joseph was responsible for keeping closed. Nothing foreign penetrated, nothing internal would ever be able to escape while he was its caretaker. And where was the serpent, where would it emerge from? And who among them was Adam, and where was Eve? Because the old servants could not be considered as such; they were far below good and evil, notions they didn't know because they were guided only by the precepts of the god, uncle, captain, and master of the house, named Joseph.

A child's laugh, which he used to hide with the edge of the tablecloth, crossed time and reached his adult lips, like when he dared to imagine the old women, who in his childhood were not yet so old, wearing the scant clothing that, according to the sacred texts, Eve wore. He finished dressing, paying more attention to the silence than to the imminent sunlight that was about to appear without permission, invading a sky clotted until then by the dry, cold countenance of the moon. When they came in to wake him, he would already be in the library, sitting in his armchair, next to Uncle José's untouchable armchair. Or perhaps he would dare to sit in that one, and so when his uncle entered his favorite room and saw him sprawled in the armchair, his feet resting on the coffee table, his elbows on the velvet armrests, and an open book in his hands, plus many others scattered on the carpet around him, as if he had been enjoying an orgy, a bacchanal, abundant in wine, drugs, women, and ecstasy, his uncle would know, only then and definitively, that his nephew Maximilian had grown up and learned by heart the precepts he had so often and so imperiously instilled in him. He would know that his nephew was already a man, and as such, a being divided in two without the possibility of reconciliation: the man of the night and the man of the day.

And so, in the morning, the man of the night, the Maximilian who knew himself to be filled with the black filth of darkness born of hidden dreams,

had slipped away before sunrise, surprising the sun as it would surprise Uncle José, and not only the innocent, naive servants who, faced with such audacity, would perhaps be pulverized by the horror of what they would later see.

But what they would see, even he didn't know for sure yet, although he suspected it in his surreptitious, accumulated anger, growing slowly as the sun rose. The sun that would be the fire under the pot in which he had stored over the years everything unsuspected, everything unremembered. A child, and later an adolescent, who every morning, naked, wandered through the cold corridors of the mansion, went down to the kitchen, looked at the sleepy dogs

who in turn looked at him for a moment and then went back to sleep, and, climbing onto a chair at first and then no longer needing to do so, lifted the lid of the pot whose fire had remained lit all night, and threw out the bundle of filth that had grown in his chest every hour, like animals, like insects, like maggots from a festering abscess, perennial, inviolable, and never inviolable by any remedy. There would be no doctor to cure him, no nurse, wise man, or church priest who could remove it. And now he realized that he had always known it with such certainty, as sure and certain was the resignation he had accepted as his closest friend.

Today, however, he doubted whether all this was an allegory of his fervent imagination or something he had actually realized. Sometimes he was much more certain of his intuitions than of his memories. Of intuitions and books, that's why he would turn to them tonight. And so he had gotten up, dressed in a robe over the nightgown he'd had since he was a teenager, and walked down the hallway from his bedroom door to the stairs that descended to the ground floor. Always in the dark, without a candle or lantern to guide him because he didn't need them to take the same steps he'd taken since he could remember. Steps on carpets that his bare feet knew, or those encased in delicate padded silk sandals, both to distract himself from insomnia, to escape to the garden on summer nights, to go down to the kitchen during the sporadic bouts of nocturnal hunger that his young body demanded. But this time the need was intellectual, and above all emotional. The consultation he was going to make in Uncle José's library came from a very deep part of his soul, long hidden, cracked and worn, with a stench he had discovered barely twenty-four hours before, or less than that. A smell that I couldn't stand because it had been kept fresh like the flesh of a recently dead person, flesh that attracted flies, that required the care of spices to simulate its bad future: degradation and sweetness. and the fetid aroma that characterized the so-called death. Because that word was too short to describe the complex process it produced, and as always, what couldn't be defined exactly ended up in the chests of everyone. And death was a generality that appeared in all books, in all the mouths of men and women until the day of death itself, and by then it was too late to truly name it, because they are already death and name, a single whole, a single entity that transcends the limits of time to settle in the infinitesimal planes of the also misnamed eternity.

But in the absence of such precision, books were better than nothing. So he entered the darkened library. He closed it slowly, groped his way to Uncle José's now-clear desk, searched the top drawer for matches, and lit one. A luminous halo illuminated his pale forehead, his flushed cheeks, and his eyes eager for who knew what. In the light of the match, it looks like a macabre resurrected doll. But what is this, he wondered? A doll has no life and therefore cannot be resurrected from a death that cannot die. Then the memory of Christ came to him: a God who was man so that he could die and thus be resurrected and return to his status as God. With this thought, he calmed his mind, the doubts that always plagued him, and he ran the small light over the surface of the desk. He found an oil lamp, because electric lighting had not yet been installed in that house. The science of electricity was never high on Uncle José's list of priorities. From his travels, he always brought back novelties that never ceased to be curious, old-fashioned souvenirs, news of modern advances, and astonishing anecdotes about marvelous machines. But the old house always remained in the previous century, as if it and its owner wished to remain forgotten by the world, so as not to attract attention. A halo, this time large, spread across almost the entire room, encompassing the shelves and glass cases behind which the books were preserved from dust and wear. The wall behind the desk was lined with glass cases up to the ceiling, where the oldest and most valuable books were stored. The other three walls were lined with shelves up to the same height, book guards reached by a ladder on noisy wheels that had long since been in need of cleaning and lubrication. Maximilian's gaze flashed through the names of Socrates, Seneca, Herodotus, and one of his uncle's favorites, the famous Plutarch and his *Parallel Lives*. He paused for a moment before the battered book whose spine had always protruded beyond the line marked by the other books on that third shelf located directly opposite the desk. Many afternoons, sitting with his uncle and chatting about lost oxen after their afternoon coffee, while observing the slow process—like that of the aforementioned death—that began with his uncle working at his desk, continued with the coffee served by one of the women, the leisurely habit of the sugar cubes, the stirring of the cup, setting it aside and asking his nephew something, and ended with the swaying of his gray-haired head against the back of his chair, his hands on the desk, and the aroma of the coffee disappearing into the recesses of history. The hidden history that clamored to be seen through that book that, like a magnet, was the point of reference for his uncle's attention and eyes, fascinated by the parallel lives of two men from two almost contemporary civilizations, similar yet different. Fascinated by dichotomy and contradiction, by idealism and reality, by the classical and the practical, by the epic and the brutal, by poetry and decadence, by the scent of incense and the hecatomb on the battlefields. He recognized himself as two different men, or at least that was how Maximilian understood it, clearly and now unsuccessfully.

He walked toward the right-hand wall where the pious volumes hung, those that spoke of religion and God. Mixed among these were all the books of moral philosophy that his uncle had acquired in the country and on his travels. Books in Latin, in ancient Arabic. The Koran was shelved just under the ceiling, the Talmud a little closer and more accessible, as if he had

determined this arrangement following a map of his own heart, just as he had arranged the books in the library following a map of his own mind. Kant and Hegel predominated, Nietzsche was conspicuous by his absence, execrated. Voltaire preserved as if in an inviolable mist, Aristotle lost in time and never recovered. Plato occupying a privileged space, right in front of the eye, irreverent and beautiful as a Narcissus.

He turned away, filled with guilt and a burning nausea, to the left, where the books of science. Astronomy and numerology alternated on the highest shelf, awaiting the illumination never obtained from the stars, knowledge abandoned in youth, because perhaps as man grows, he puts down ever deeper roots and at the end of his life is only eyes at ground level, ready to close soon and sink as well. The astrolabes that the uncle had bought in Italy and the East had already been moved to the basement many years before, clearing space for anatomy books. This was the uncle's favorite science, and also Maximilian's in the years of his first, most conscious and interested reading. There were copies of all types and places, from Vesalius's *De humanis corporis fabrica* to the latest editions of a certain Testut. When he was still very young, he was fascinated by taking anatomical atlases off the shelves, with Uncle José's permission, and gazing in them, like geographical maps, at human structures and tissues, as if he were exploring the mountains, valleys, and rivers of a world he would one day visit. Later, when he could read and understand what he read, he came across Spiegel's *Anatomy*, almost three centuries old, and discovered that the beauty of the diagrams developed in parallel with the beauty of the knowledge he had acquired. The human body was thus formed slowly but harmoniously. And one day he discovered his blood, which was also found in those books, and the bones of his fingers, which he had seen perfectly drawn in the old books, and his skin, traversed by multiform paths of veins impossible to imitate in every copy of that library. He discovered the beating of his heart impacting the surface of his arms or his neck, and when he was older, the strange, astonishing fluidity of his sexual secretions.

He memorized the branches of the arteries, the names of the nerves, the exact shape of each bone. He even knew the possible variations and deformities. Dissection interested him; taxidermy led him to ask questions in the slums of Cádiz, until he discovered that it was more difficult to preserve bodies than souls. When he returned one day from that search, he was astonished by his own astonishment, by knowing himself so naive, so ignorant of his own history. The maids tried to console him by serving him a lavish meal, and his uncle, who was away on a trip, looked at him from his portrait next to the portrait of his dead parents.

That afternoon he walked slowly toward the cemetery. When he arrived, it had already closed, and darkness fell over the ground and the bars that separated the land of the dead from that of the living. Resting his head between two iron bars, he felt imprisoned by an enormous creative and destructive hand. God had created him, he told himself, and also claimed the right to remove him from this world. But what would happen to his body, he wondered? It would rot irremediably.

Anatomy books were cemeteries, but theory preserved them from reality. The beauty of art came to the aid of science, and thus science itself became an eternity that consoled humanity for its transience.

Then he would search for his soul, he told himself that afternoon, now turned into night, as he returned to the half-empty mansion. He re-entered the library, where he had long spent most of his time, and, turning his back on the left wall, he devoted himself from then on to exploring the books on the right side, like someone dissecting the soul without fear that the object of his study might crumble in his hands like the precarious bones of the dead.

However, today, several years later—not so many years in reality, but with the feeling of a millennium having passed—he had turned his back on the right side this time and, turning to the left wall, resumed his gaze at the spines of the scientific books. He lowered his gaze from astronomers like Galileo and Copernicus, oblivious to the old conflicts and the now-irrelevant moral bloodbaths between the clergy and the state, between individuals and crowds. He ran his hand over Newton's books on physics and arithmetic. He ignored those volumes that discussed the alchemy of the elements, which he never fully understood, like a hard meal that didn't agree with him. And he stopped on the shelf within reach of his hands, just a little below shoulder height, perhaps at the perfect distance from the solar plexus, that other mystery, knot of nerves, main station of reflexes, of the body's autonomous activities, a place many anatomists said is the habitat of the soul. Where anguish and pain are felt, where joy forms and flows like torrential spring water. Where suicidal daggers are stabbed and where the first movements of fetuses are felt.

With one hand holding the lantern, and the other taking an anatomy book from the shelf, he read the spine to see if it was the right one. This one looked like it, the Anatomy of Juan Valverde de Amusco. He returned to the desk and sat in Uncle José's armchair. He rested his feet on the table, defiant but without thinking about his defiance, pushing the papers aside and putting the lantern back in its place. With the book on his lap, he opened it to the first page. He read the date and place of publication: Rome, 1556. He admired the artistic diagrams depicting fragments of the human body, limbs, muscles, ribs, heart, viscera split in half like Pandora's drawers. He reached the neurology section and studied the brain diagrams, but his study was a search without a precise object. Doubt, surely fear, made him increase his anxiety and fuel his desire, looking at the clock on the table. It was almost three in the morning. The silence was almost complete, the external darkness in keeping with the inner search he was now undertaking. Any resemblance to a cemetery was pure license or a poetic effect of incipient romanticism, which would appeal to any sensitive spirit, but not to him. The stage of melodramatic sentimentality had passed. He was in a period of events, of exploration. And undoubtedly also of experimentation. He was an adventurer.

When he found the osteology textbook, on a random page, almost halfway through the book, there was a diagram of the bones at the base of the skull. What an intricate labyrinth of tunnels, passageways, and recesses formed

by flat bones like very thin sheets for the passage of multiply branched nerves, arteries and veins, for the passage of secretions and fluids. All of them enclosed and protected by the seemingly secure structure of the cranial vault. Like cells in a temple, rooms where monks spent their half-sleep, assured of God's goodness.

A bone that amazed him with its structure and marveled him with its function. Its tunnels served as a passageway for one of man's most important structures: the elements that give function to the eyes. The sphenoid resembled a bird trapped in the center of the human skull, its wings outstretched and petrified. An embalmed bird or a petrified bird. A representation, no doubt, a concretized allegory, an idea made bone: if everything man loved, if every thought was fleeting and uncatchable, at least he had achieved, like a miraculous or magical event, explainable nonetheless by science, a bird hunted in an imperial forest full of convolutions formed by the branches of intertwined trees, whose wings were spread before rigor mortis, and dusted with lime until it achieved the necessary hardness to install it in the center of the human skull, to remind us of the vulnerability of ideas and the coercive power of man, his own impiety, and to reverse the prevailing selfishness by displaying, as in a closed museum, the scapegoats of divine creation. And on the diagram on that page, he discovered a pencil mark in Uncle José's handwriting. Not a study note, because nothing was further from Uncle José's interest than anatomy or dissection, but a mark like that of someone who, while reading, finds something that surprises or disturbs them. The mark represented a question mark with a slight tremor that could be seen in the uncertain line next to the left eye of the drawn skull. That is, the empty bony orbit, through whose depths ran the optic nerve and blood vessels.

Maximiliano lowered his feet from the table and approached it, resting the book and holding it up to the light. There he saw, on the drawing of the left sphenoid, a trace or a line that Uncle José had drawn. A fracture? Perhaps he hadn't intended to depict that, or perhaps a crack. But more likely a fracture line resulting from a blow he had suffered. He doesn't recall ever telling him about an episode that suggested something like that. Maximilian himself, in his childhood games, suffered countless blows to his head. He tried to remember if he had fainted, swollen eyes, or temporary blindness.

Then he thought of visions, hallucinations, mystical delusions.

He remembered what he had seen in Brother Aurelio's left eye, and what he had seen the night before in his uncle's gaze as he stood at the foot of his bed.

He could not reconcile these blasphemies, the defiling of Christ by associating Him with such ideas, dwelling in the filthy minds of those men, one mad, the other depraved. The harm they had done him had received its just punishment in the first case; the other remained unpunished. He touched the pit of his stomach, in the center of the pain, and remembered the nights of his childhood and adolescence, the nights lost by his own psyche in the darkness of time, crystallized in fragments of broken glass

thrown into the fire, whose bursting was a crackling that slowly diminished in the old kitchen, as in the antechambers of hell.

It was through Brother Aurelio's eye, through that fissure, perhaps, that he began to glimpse the then-faint black light emerging. A light that didn't reveal the darkness but made it manifest, as if the darkness weren't a void but a wall, a concave wall with an open bottom. A naturally undermined fissure, opened more and more by the force of constant blows over the years.

The hidden memories had to do with Jesus only in that he was the wall that hid the truth, the protective gatekeeper, the owner of one of the many gates to hell, finally recovered.

He looked at the clock and saw the faint light of dawn filtering through the latticed windows. It was the time when Uncle José was returning from his nighttime revelry with his friends. He must have been approaching with a staggering step along the streets that led to the mansion. She could hear his footsteps now, his drunken murmur that never entirely lost the discipline of his military rank.

She waited to hear him lock the front door, enter, and close it with a bang. She heard him dodge the presence of the maids who were trying to help him walk to his room without bumping into anything or falling down the stairs. She listened and appreciated the iron, merciful rapping of the doors, which protected every man in his early morning state, and the light that always tried to wake him up, to confront him with a reality he had precisely tried to avoid all night with alcohol, with sex, with irrelevant disquisitions, increasingly irrelevant to the point of being so superficial, that words and actions became feathers flying in the wind, like the feathers of dead birds. Perhaps the same birds the men had petrified and installed inside their own heads. And so, what they tried so hard to achieve was ruined by their very actions. He waited patiently. Then he heard Uncle José's angry shouts, muffled by the doors of the house. He thought he understood one of the women saying:

"But my lord, you will wake the boy."

The boy, however, was already a man who had left the library while the others argued upstairs. The women returned to their rooms, grumbling. Maximilian went down to the kitchen, glanced at the now old and tired dogs. He looked for a shovel by the fire, which still held some warmth. He climbed the first steep staircase, made of carved stone. Then, the elegant polished marble staircase that led to the first floor. He waited for the silence to settle, to take root in the women's sleep. His uncle's room was empty, he must have imagined. That night the old man had drunk too much and was acting more out of control than usual. He went to his own room, where he found the door open, and the early light penetrating through the lattices, dividing the room and the body of his uncle, whose back was to him, into multiple fragments.

Maximilian must have said something—he would never remember what—or it was his breathing that gave him away. The uncle turned around after

checking that the bed was rumpled and empty, and someone was breathing behind it. Then the old man looked at him for a few seconds, first puzzled, then inquisitive, then a moment later very angry. But it wasn't what he said to his nephew, if he said anything at all, not even what he might have managed to say, nor even the look in his eyes, which was simply that of a drunken, old man tired of his own loneliness and frustration.

He saw his own image reflected in the uncle's left eye, with the shovel he had picked up from the kitchen in his hands, which he now raised above his head. He felt the shovel's clumsy impact against the door frame, something that slowed his movement, but which was of no use to the old man's slow reflexes. The edge of the shovel struck and embedded itself in Uncle José's face, obliquely from the left side of his forehead to the right side of his lips.

When the body fell, Maximiliano was no longer there. He would only remember the image of his face split in two with a long iron rod driven into it, right in the center of a vision worthy of the most hellish creation of man.

The figure of Christ eaten away by sin.

17

The days passed more quickly than they expected. The noise of Buenos Aires filtered through the closed doors of the old hospice that had once served as a convent, a school, once a prison, then a leper colony, and now fulfilled all of these functions. For what were they, its inhabitants, if not prisoners who could not leave until the authorities allowed it, or sick people who had to be kept isolated to prevent the transmission of their diseases? Men and women who in that confinement learned to live together and resign themselves to their own destinies, seeing in the altars of the old hospice, the refuges where God waited like a Greek statue, beautiful and unattainable, but always tall and upright, overflowing with pride and wisdom, power above all, and even more so over that old building populated by sick beings, cockroaches moving at night through the kitchens of his kingdom.

The days passed, and there was only a week left until the quarantine was over. Neither Maximilian nor Elsa knew what they would do when they left. They did know, however, and in this they had been two exemplary students, infected, perhaps, by those walls that unwittingly guarded the wise words of ancient priest masters, speeches, prayers, readings before and after long prayers and ablutions. They learned from each other how to tolerate the blank time, how to endure and pacify their souls to the intimate rhythm of those walls, oblivious to the modern world that vibrated threateningly outside, trying to filter in, to unite them in a common desire for admiration and fascination, even forcing them to leave, even escaping, if this was their first crime, the first corruption to which the modern spirit of America would lead them, of which they had heard many tales, both in Spain and during the voyage. But their versions were different. While Elsa in her village in the Pyrenees had heard almost nothing, and was therefore

frightened by the tales that talkative young men passed on on the ship, Maximiliano was already accustomed to these tales, more distorted by popular mischief than imbued with any truth. Uncle José had spoken to him of America as a continent both lavish and poor, and as his fascination faded with his frequent visits, his descriptions became infrequent and contemptuous. Big cities, tall buildings, engines roaring across vast fields, vast coastlines. And above all, the strange people, an amalgam of Native Americans with immigrants of all nationalities, and most curious of all, their descendants: bulging blonds like Scandinavians, light eyes on dark skin, dark eyes on milky skin, dark hair in every possible shade, thick lips and thin lips, wavy hair on faces and conformations that didn't seem to match. America was a kind of zoo where no one understood anyone. The cities were filled with the noise of the new motor vehicles that were slowly replacing cars, which, however, would take many decades to disappear completely. People fighting and shouting, then crying and hugging, amidst Italian dialects and the smell of hot sauces, amidst cries and Jewish chants, amidst the bells of vast and majestic churches, amidst shouts of Polish accents interrupted by the overflowing music of orchestras emanating from halls or theaters to the rhythm of waltzes or operas. And from the slums near the port came the aromas of whores and bars, of the cobblestones always wet in winter, of the cries of abused children or those rocked by the rough arms of women asleep in the slumber of alcohol. And from further away, as if coming from the wide river, or if it had formed on those almost motionless waters after traveling across the ocean, or having been born in the ocean itself, arrived the notes of a strange music in the chords produced by an old instrument that would find in these lands and in this century a vigor, an unexpected and welcome rebirth. The bandoneon had an indecipherable sound: wind passing through flexible, metallic surfaces, as if softened by water, rocked by waves, and therefore abundant with ripples from a choppy swell that hits the wood of old docks. Then the calm water would still, becoming invisible, allowing the wind to sound between the pillars, high-pitched like a screech through the cracks, deep and profound.

Maximiliano had heard tango in Cádiz a couple of times, and these days, rumors of recorded music reached him through the windows of the hospice, played on phonographs that the residents of the other blocks must have played to console themselves after long workdays. He tried to explain to Elsa what that music was, but she couldn't even imagine what a bandoneon would sound like. She couldn't understand the rhythm, she couldn't make out more than the strumming, and it hurt her ears, she said. But she didn't care about the music at this moment, because she had discovered that Maximilian's body was more beautiful than she imagined.

They were on an old mattress he had found in a warehouse, hidden behind a door and captured the night he knew she would come. After the caresses and kisses stolen on the ship, then recovered behind doors and under the darkness of the arches during the hours when they were supposed to be lying down and sleeping in their respective pavilions, he had managed to get her up. to a room he found abandoned and locked with an old latch, discovered one afternoon of boredom and tedium, happy to see that from

such a spot he could see a large part of the city, the stately homes, the nearby stream, the convents and churches, the shopping streets; but above all, he had been amazed to contemplate the enormous moon, like a pot of fire, like a theater spotlight placed right above him, not dazzling him, but illuminating him. He had seen his own hands, almost translucent in the light of that moon.

That night, at three in the morning, to the sound of aquatic music, which was nevertheless a tango born from cobblestones strewn with death, or perhaps a heartbreaking and melancholic Neapolitan canzonetta, or a Sephardic intoned by a wandering and forever lost soul, they made love for the first time, after caresses, advances, and timidity, talking and anger, reconciling and revealing themselves. Piece by piece, slowly, it was stripped away amid laughter and isolated comments, until it became something so natural that it no longer deserved scrutiny or attention. And the sweat emerged as part of love, and their hands recovered a knowledge that neither of them believed they possessed. And they were possessed, no doubt, but unknowingly, by the ancestral desires of primitive men and women. By thinking and planning nothing more than that mattress and that room, they were a man and a woman alone in Buenos Aires, isolated by the sea and the land, elevated on a terrace that dominated both elements, and willing only to abide by the power of the moon over them. Not only the night and its light, the music and the murmurs of the waning city, but also, and more importantly, to obey the call of the future, whatever it might be, willing even to resign themselves to any drama or kind of life. Because they knew that the act of love they had committed was irreversible, and they knew they were bound together for the rest of their lives, no matter how much distance created distance between them, even oblivion or heartbreak.

That act was a pact.

That's how Maximilian understood it, and for the first time he let go of his entire past as if he had shed himself and were now a different man, freed and yet bound to new commitments that this time he chose for himself. Yet there was the moon, and its perfect circle brought to mind Euclid's calculations of the number pi. The sixteenth letter of the Greek alphabet, equivalent to the Spanish "p." P for Peter the traitor, perhaps? But who was he to judge whom Jesus chose as the fundamental foundation of his church? And there they were, springing from the moon, the geometric calculations of the number pi, endless circles: God and Satan exchanging the leading role in history: the narrow yet infinite margin of the number pi, the aftertaste that flowed from the three whole numbers, the crack through which the indecipherable, the indefinite, the uncertainty, the doubt of the whole, seeped in. Because nothing was whole if there was a crack in that whole, through which the essential escaped or the undesirable penetrated. No knowledge was worthless if indefinable space existed somewhere, if even zero existed.

But now he left the past behind, for that night, seeing in Elsa's eyes the expected thread of innocence, the wonder with which the woman disguised herself to hide desires as old as the world she felt rising in her body, even

though she wasn't a virgin. And Elsa wasn't, although he hadn't asked her. Doing so would have meant confessing his own experience, the past he'd needed to flee by boarding the ship on which he'd met her.

Thinking about that, he fell asleep holding her, unaware that the next morning his bedmates would notice his absence, unless he woke with the first light of the sun and shook her gently, her still-naked body stretching sleepily, the sweet debris of that night lost. He didn't trust himself, so he stayed awake, admiring her as he admired the moon, which he loved and feared as one can only fear God. Then, like a malevolent thought he must destroy immediately, and whose remnant remained in the deepest shelves of his memory, he wondered if, just as God had died for him, she had died too.

It wasn't the daylight that brought him out of the shallow sleep he'd unwittingly sunk into—sex was relaxing, he'd almost forgotten that—but the morning chill. They were both still naked, but she was covered by a blanket. A shiver ran through him, shaking him, raising the hair all over his body, forcing him to cover himself under the same blanket as her. Soon, the warmth of Elsa's skin began to excite him again, and he had no qualms about caressing her again. Elsa was waking up, without opening her eyes. He saw her surrendered to him, blindly, to her skin and her smell, to everything he wanted. It was even better than during the night, because there were no words, but only two bodies filled with sensations, protected in each other by their own mutual warmth, nourished by previous experience that enriched them and took so many things for granted: tastes, pleasures, laughter, memories. The complete memory that formed love and sex in a single instant that is at once time and space, thus constituting an entity more than a feeling, a foundation with deep roots, whose death would from then on be a real death, because it would leave a memory, or many of them, somewhere and at any moment, surviving remains, like all matter that is not lost, but transforms. The bones of love, Maximilian told himself.

When he stood up naked in front of the window, he heard the voices from downstairs. It was already late; everyone in the wards would notice their absence. He was about to warn her when she opened her eyes.

"I know, my love. It's late, and everyone has noticed." But how many times in these weeks has the same thing happened to others? One challenge from the doctors and it'll all be over by noon. Besides, they think we're husband and wife, you know, so don't worry.

"It's not because of me; everyone's already giving me dirty looks, but the women are going to talk behind your back. 'If she's doing it with her husband,' they'll say, 'why don't we do it with whoever we want?'"

Elsa laughed.

"In a few days we'll be gone. Have you thought about what we're going to do? We don't have any friends anywhere, we don't have jobs, and very little money. And I don't know what to do about Dad..."

Maximiliano let the minutes pass, the heat of the sun slowly warming their bodies. Lost for lost, he told himself, they could stay in that hiding place all day, making love whenever they wanted, with no other limit than waiting for them to come looking for them.

"I've thought about it, dear." In the men's ward, conversations are overheard, and I've discovered some travelers who know the entire territory. I'll ask around and find out how to reach the tribes you mentioned.

"But the fortune teller told me that, my love. How can I really trust her? Now, so much time and so far away, the day we visited her with Dad seems like a dream."

"We've talked about it, Elsa. There aren't many options. A hospital would be like evicting him; that's why he should have stayed in Spain."

She nodded without speaking. Then she said:

"Let's go down and face the situation."

They dressed and quietly opened the door. Sunlight flooded everything; there didn't even seem to be any shadows inside the building, as if the very structure had been built to denounce them. But denounce what, he thought? If he was proud of anything, it was what had happened between them. He definitely felt like a man; his body betrayed him in every part. He adored Elsa's body because it was beautiful and perfectly complemented his own. There wasn't even pain, not the slightest hint of displeasure or difficulty, as if each of them had been waiting for a long time and that nocturnal encounter was nothing more than the destined assembly of something more than a machine: a common being ready to disintegrate and merge again into one, with the sole purpose of remembering through pleasure the unique substance, the collective body, the founding entity that had always constituted them.

They went down to the dining room and sat down as if they had arrived from their wards. They met knowing glances from a few, angry looks from the resentful. The nurses and staff didn't seem to have noticed, and wouldn't if none of the inmates reported them. The women stared at Elsa, some dazed, envious, others with lust in their eyes, silently asking her questions. The men looked at Maximiliano sarcastically, whispering among themselves.

They sat next to each other, arm in arm. Then Elsa asked for her father.

"I'll go find Don Roberto," he said, but she grabbed his hand and asked him not to leave her alone.

"But..."

"I'm not hungry, dear," she murmured in his ear, "but if you want to eat..."

"Nor do we. Let's go see him."

None of this helped to silence the rumors. Their whispers in each other's ears, their half-hidden caresses, their faces as worried as two frightened puppies. All of this contributed to a growing murmur surrounding them as they walked away toward the pavilions, but it was as if they were actually getting closer, because the murmur was a collective shout, a cacophony of obscene words falling around them. They both stopped for a moment, enduring the rain that turned their privacy into a dirty, smelly garment. Anything could happen in that place. There was sex in the bathrooms, there were addicts and perverts. The illness was no reason not to escape from other, more transgender realities. Stories, but no less satisfying. Anything that accelerated the time of death, or at least simulated its slow passage, was welcome. But when the relationship between two people had a different aura, perhaps cleaner, and when there were no signs of shame or pretense, as if it were so natural and deserved, it generated resentment among those who couldn't share it.

They entered the men's ward. A nurse tried to prevent Elsa from entering, but she told him she wanted to know if her father was okay, and Maximiliano was with her. They found Don Roberto in bed, awake and restless.

"Dad! I'm so sorry!"

The old man didn't seem to understand the reason for the apology; he blindly touched his daughter's clothes and then one of Maximiliano's sleeves. He tried to hug them, but perhaps he was smelling something. He was an old man, but he should remember the smell of those who have recently made love, especially how a man feels and smells after such an event. He didn't say anything, but they both understood that he'd noticed.

"Shall we have breakfast, Don Roberto?"

"I'm not hungry today." He looked around the bed, blindly of course, but what he was really doing was searching with his ears. "I've heard footsteps this morning. I already know those of our neighbors, but I rarely heard those footsteps, let alone the smell of their clothes."

"What are you talking about, Dad?" Elsa said, when Maximiliano was already looking around and spotted a fellow resident from the ward at the door. They had never spoken to him; he seemed to stay in a circle of acquaintances that nonetheless changed from time to time. Maybe he sold drugs, one of those permanent inmates who had access to the infirmary, or perhaps he had contacts outside the city. He must have had one or more businesses, which was why he approached new ones stealthily. The fragile balance of his businesses shouldn't be threatened. His footsteps echoed in the empty ward; only a couple of elderly patients were still sleeping in the bright morning light that filtered through the barred windows. The man was of medium height, with short, dark hair and a thick beard, an aquiline nose, dark eyes, and very pale skin. He had deep dark circles under his eyes and a bright gaze. He was wearing a good-quality jacket covering what appeared to be corduroy pants and a turtleneck sweater. He approached with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. When he was so

close they couldn't help but smell the unmistakable scent of medicine, he pulled out a hand and extended it.

"Good morning, colleagues. We haven't met before, it's my fault, I admit. I have a hard time striking up conversations with new people..."

He waited for a reply, and when he didn't receive one, he continued.

"My name is Juan Valverde, and I'm a sort of perpetual prisoner in this blessed home." He smiled, looking specifically at Maximiliano and ignoring Elsa and the old man. His gaze was so fixed on him that she feared for a moment that he knew something about her past, about the world she had left behind. But that was impossible. And yet, something seemed familiar about that man. He was definitely Argentinian; his accent betrayed it. Even so, Maximiliano couldn't shake the idea that he knew her name from somewhere.

"You're probably wondering why I've decided to start a conversation with you right now..." He looked at Elsa as if she were an object of decoration and, at the same time, the reason for a transaction. "The truth is, you're all the rage, as you've probably noticed, but the nurses will turn a blind eye if we reach an agreement."

Elsa tugged on Maximiliano's arm. She looked at her and told him to calm down.

"And what would be the consequence of not accepting?" "You're new, so I'll enlighten you with my experience in these luxurious dungeons. As the rules of the old leper colony state, and which still apply within these walls since no one has bothered to adapt them to the new century—there are more important things in politics, obviously—you have put your colleagues at risk by transmitting potential infectious diseases." He looked at Elsa, anticipating her protest. "It doesn't matter if they're husbands, madam, with all due respect."

The man was a braggart, a forger, a merchant like those who had their stalls around the temple in Jerusalem and Jesus had destroyed. He saw Maximilian gesture and said:

"Calm down, my friend. I'm on your side, that's why I'm here and not at the hospice management right now. I'll continue, if you allow me. As I was saying, the rules are clear, and the reprimand in your case consists of a few more weeks of monitoring. Due to the risk of pregnancy, of course." He took his hands out of his pockets and spread his arms, raising his shoulders in resignation. "It's all for the good health of the people of Buenos Aires, isn't it?"

"And how much would it cost?"

Valverde smiled almost angelically. And Maximiliano knew how close that smile was to the demonic. A fatalistic crescent had formed on the man's lips, and the teeth weren't just teeth, but fragments of bone anchored in them.

"Anything you have in cash... and I'll accept valuables, too."

Maximiliano halted Elsa's anger, her drive and strength forged through years of fieldwork and animal husbandry at the foot of the mountains. Her body had left its gentleness behind, and resilience was returning from the fields fertilized by cold and harvest.

He now knew it was useless to resist; doing so would risk the little more than a week they had left to complete the quarantine. He stopped Elsa by her arms, as she tried to throw herself on top of Valverde. His angry face and her hands, clenched with helplessness, were visible, and Maximiliano could barely hold on. Finally, she gave in, but he didn't let go completely, and she indulged herself by spitting at the man.

Valverde laughed; it wasn't the first time, no doubt, and he didn't seem to mind, since that face wasn't his real face, but a mask molded with the features of his soul. He wiped it with the sleeve of his coat and said:

"It's all right, madam, you got carried away. I know you'd like to do more than that to me, and I understand, have no doubt. But I think you'll change your mind when I tell you that I might have something more to offer you in return, of course, for your undoubtedly generous gift." He sat down on Don Roberto's bed, and Roberto, who had heard everything, got up.

"Calm down, Papa," Elsa said.

Maximiliano saw in the old man's sightless gaze what he had been fearing for a long time, and, holding his head, looked into his eyes. The left one was transparent, and deep within were restless images, figures that transformed into black and white, constantly and violently. Elsa noticed Maximiliano was scared and asked what was wrong. The old man let the hands hold him, perhaps because he felt protected; there was little left of the vigor he'd still had during the boat trip. The hands of a young man—not to mention his daughter's, but of a young man who had recently made love—transmitted memories of his youth, brought back the smell and touch of the past. And suddenly, within those sensations, something repelled him in Maximiliano's hands, and he pulled away. Trying to see Valverde through the clouds and fog, he said:

"Speak clearly or leave us alone at once. I'm dying while you're wandering around!"

Valverde laughed.

"Very well, then you'll know this place is like a small town; everyone knows everything, and more is said about the newcomers than the old ones." So I've been listening, so to speak, and I've learned that you're looking for transportation north, to the coast if I'm not mistaken. If you have relatives or what the hell you're going for, excuse me, ma'am, I'm not interested. I'm only interested in your predicament and need, as you are sources of income for people like me.

"And how can you help us, if I may ask?" Elsa confronted her.

"By providing you with information about places, boarding times, contacts with acquaintances, whatever you need, my lady."

His mockery didn't land with Elsa. She seemed interested and was willing to talk. Maximiliano interrupted her; he didn't know how much Valverde knew about them, and he didn't want Elsa to tell him more.

"And how much are we talking about?"

"I already told you, everything you can arrange, in exchange for your freedom in a week and your long-awaited trip." She immediately looked at the old man, knowing that was where the issue lay. "Of course, I'll let you think it over and start a family collection. Whatever you offer me will pay for part or all of what I've proposed."

"And how do we know you'll keep your promise?" Elsa was growing increasingly nervous, so far removed from the sweet radiance of love that night.

"My dear Mrs. Méndez Iribarne, I'll leave that for you to deduce." With a military farewell gesture, she said goodbye.

The three of them let almost a full week pass. They tried to cool things down. They didn't talk about their love, but instead listened to the taunts, provocations, and nicknames the other inmates called them. Of course, they weren't called out loud now, since everyone was aware of the arrangement with Valverde. Although it hadn't been finalized yet, no one had any doubt that it would be so. They counted the money she had stashed in a sewn fold of her bodice. They recounted it over and over again over the course of those days, as if each of those bills were going to be engraved in their memories. Roberto had a tin of coins to contribute, but they thanked him, saying they would need them for daily use if they accepted Valverde's offer. The old man nodded, put the tin under the bed, and watched as the bills passed from one hand to the other. , the volatile remains of what had been his farm at the foot of the Pyrenees. Maximilian had practically nothing to contribute to the deal; he had boarded with no cash, and now only had the suit the doctor had given him and a good but empty leather wallet. Then he remembered the silver cross he had worn around his neck since childhood, the one his parents had given him a few months before they died. He pulled it out from between the buttons of his shirt and looked at it, upside down.

"Do you think he'll give me something for this, Elsa?"

"But my dear, it's not right for you to hand this over; it's a memento, as well as a symbol of God. It will protect you, it will protect us."

He didn't want to break Elsa's fallacy, especially now that he loved her more than he had ever loved the very God she was talking about, so he hid it back under his shirt.

"What are these pesetas to him? He'll probably want us to exchange them for Argentine money first." "I don't think so," said Maximiliano. "I think guys like him profit from everything because they have the means to do it. Besides, with the difference in value, he's sure to come out on top. What

bothers me is having to do it, my love, a lifetime of working on that farm, and having to give it up..."

"If it's for Dad, and for us too..."

"But how are we going to start living here, Elsa...?"

"I don't know, but first we have to take Dad to get him treated, if they can..."

"I'll take care of that." He gathered his courage, taking a deep breath. He no longer felt alone, nor pressured like he was within four walls, nor overwhelmed or anguished. Having made love with Elsa was a liberation. How long would it last? he wondered.

They arranged to meet Juan Valverde for Saturday night, and that same afternoon, when the name repeated itself in his mind, like a nursery rhyme, he knew where he knew him from. It was the same name as the anatomist whose book he had read in Uncle José's library. When he realized this, he was lying in bed in the ward. He went to find Elsa, called her from the door, and she left her sewing project on the chair. The women chuckled; she ignored them.

"I'm going alone tonight."

"Don't even think about it—besides, it's my father's and my money we're going to hand over." She realized her abruptness and said, "I'm sorry, my love..."

Maximilian hugged her, and she cried once more.

"I know, my dear, but I don't trust that man. Besides, I must make sure he gives me everything we need to travel to the coast: papers, names, schedules, places. Remember, we're lost in this country."

"Okay, all I would do is cry or hit him. If you really think it's worth it after talking to him, give him everything."

That night, after dinner, when everyone was already in bed, Maximiliano got up in the shadows. He knew many were still awake and would notice, but it was very common to see someone getting up in the middle of the night due to insomnia, to go to the bathroom or get into bed with someone else. He, and even more so the older inmates, had stopped being surprised by this nocturnal activity. Today, however, it wasn't yet 1:00 a.m. He had arranged to meet Valverde in one of the upstairs bathrooms, which were less crowded at night. Likewise, they would wait for those inside—he knew many were having sex or simply masturbating—to come out. He glanced at Don Roberto's bed; he was sure he was awake, but he didn't want to disturb him, nor did he want the old man to bother him with now-useless advice. He went upstairs and reached the bathroom door. The hallways were dimly lit by low-voltage lamps hanging from the ceiling; there were even sections of the room still lit by kerosene lamps. He entered the bathroom, large, but not as large as the one downstairs. A strong smell of

ammonia emanated from the latrines along one wall; the others held showers and sinks. No one seemed to be there, but soon he heard the sound of a flush being pulled and a man emerging from the bathroom, buttoning his pants.

"Valverde," Maximiliano called.

No one answered. Then he heard an unmistakable groan. Two men emerged from the darkened shower area. They didn't look at him; they left, closing the door. Then Valverde entered and locked it. Maximiliano wondered how many more privileges that man must have.

"Good evening, Mr. Méndez Iribarne."

"Let's leave the formalities to the gentlemen, Valverde. There are only a few of us, and we know each other."

The man laughed, appreciating the frankness with which he involved them both.

"Very well, as you wish. But I am polite even in the worst of circumstances; that's how I was taught."

Maximiliano wondered if the man was a good actor or if he was serious. All that nonsense sounded like nonsense, as he had heard people say in Buenos Aires. So he decided to ask him:

"You'll tell me it'sThat's nonsense, but I've been wondering since this afternoon.

Do you have family in Rome?

"Why are you interested, if I may ask before I answer?"

"I know a 16th-century anatomist, that is, I've read a book of his, and his name is Juan Valverde de Amusco."

"What a coincidence, isn't it? I'm not referring to our names, but to the fact that you know him, and that we happened to meet here. Yes, sir, that doctor is a very ancient ancestor of mine. You see, in my family, we've always been interested in medicine and everything related to it, for generations. Very few have been able to train to become doctors, but all of us, without exception, have been interested in some related branch.

"And you, too?"

"I sense the irony in your question, but yes, too. What do you think I'm doing in this hospice? I'm just another sick person studying other sick people, and I'm not just talking about diseases of the body, but of the mind, above all." Over the years, I've drawn many conclusions about human

behavior, which I'll pass on to my son when he grows up. I intend to have him study medicine, or at least become a pharmacist, if his mother doesn't interfere. With me locked up here, she'll do whatever she wants with him. That's why, you understand, I must dedicate myself to my business. It's hard to support a family if you expect them to achieve more than the state is willing to grant them.

Maximiliano resisted being convinced by these supposedly human motivations for blackmail or extortion; however, Valverde could have mentioned it earlier if his intention had been to move him in some way, and he hadn't, unless this was also part of his strategic theatrics.

"I know you don't entirely believe me, but I'll give you an example. You, my friend, are not married to Miss Elsa, at least not yet."

"A wise deduction, Valverde, but not too elaborate; most people here must know that." "You're right, but that's not my conclusion. It's the strange coincidences that the officials mistook you for husband and wife, without any papers, and you also happen to be the owner of a very elegant suit—too elegant, I'd say."

"Very well, and what are your conclusions?"

"The following: that you have stolen, or perhaps even killed someone, to obtain another identity."

"Your mistakes make me laugh; my name is what you already know."

"I didn't say 'obtain your identity,' but rather another identity. You could have the same name, or almost the same name, and be someone else."

"And for what purpose, if I may ask?"

"I already told you, or are you deaf? Having killed someone is both the cause and the instrument."

Maximiliano didn't reply.

"Let's get to our business."

"Whatever. How much is your family willing to offer me?"

That question hurt Maximiliano's ego more than any of the previous assumptions. The man knew the money wasn't his. He offered him a partial sum, to see if he'd settle for that.

"That, my friend, only covers your freedom, and you see, I'm giving you a discount because I like the old man, your father-in-law, even if it's not reciprocal, as I've already realized."

"That's all I have..."

"Don't make me laugh now, Méndez Iribarne. We here in Buenos Aires also know how to bargain, and we're experts, believe me. You need to travel to the coast, where exactly?"

"We don't know. We're looking for people from an indigenous village who perform brain cures, that's what they told us back in Spain."

"It's true, they're missionaries. There are only a few left; almost all of them have been killed. They live in an area of the jungle that the government has given them."

"And how do you reach them?"

Valverde gestured with his hand. Maximiliano offered another sum.

"Let's not waste time haggling. Tell me honestly what you have, and I'll tell you what you need."

Maximiliano had to give up. The other man, after half a minute of silence, his eyes shining in the dim bathroom light, responded, not looking at him, but instead watching a pair of cockroaches zigzag across the floor.

"All right, my friend," he said, and extended his hand.

Maximiliano gave him only half the money.

"And where's the trust?"

"My trust begins where yours ends, Valverde."

The man laughed.

"I'll accept half for now, but I need a guarantee that I'll get the rest when you know what you want to know."

Maximiliano thought about the weapons. He hadn't brought a single kitchen knife. How come, he wondered, he hadn't thought of that. He saw Valverde's hand approaching, half-open, but empty. Would he strike him, strangle him? He was a former seminarian who only grew bolder when something stronger than his own body defended him; he had to admit that, but it didn't distress him.

Valverde's hand fumbled between the buttons of Maximilian's shirt and pulled out the cross. can.

"I like this relic, my friend," and he tore it off to put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. "I'll give it back to you when you give me the other half."

"But it's worthless," Maximiliano said absurdly, since at least the man had been content with that trifle. But now he wasn't sure it was even if the other had been interested.

"A silver cross carved by indigenous people from the Jesuit missions at least two centuries ago. It's worth a lot on the market, and it's mine for now."

"What do you know!" Maximiliano protested.

"It was you, my friend, who mentioned my ancestors, not me."

Two hours later, with pencil notes on bathroom paper in his pocket, Maximiliano went back to bed. Dawn would soon come, but he wouldn't be able to sleep. He had understood Valverde's instructions well, detailed and exact, as if he had seen them on a map of a place he already knew. However, this wasn't what worried him. He felt the emptiness of the cross in his chest. Why hadn't they told him it was so valuable? He didn't even remember when it had been given to him. Uncle José was the one who told him his parents had given it to him shortly before they died, when he was still a child. He had worn it for as long as he could remember, but in reality, he didn't even remember his parents' faces. Or perhaps it was Uncle José himself who gave it to him after one of his trips, and told him it had belonged to his parents, as a form of compensation for their tragic and early deaths? Uncle José had told him they had died in a river in Misiones. Perhaps it was in a shipwreck, perhaps they were killed by Indians or opium smugglers. They were alone and defenseless, his uncle said, exposed only to God's goodness. Their bodies were never found. But other times he had told him that the child had been born in Spain, and the times he dared to ask again, his uncle contradicted himself, and, confused by his drunkenness and anger, he would lock him in the room, while he remained touching and looking at the cross on his chest.

Who had given it to his parents, and which of them was wearing it? And above all, this question arose, like a flash: why had they given it away, if they didn't know they were going to die?

Perhaps it had been stolen from his parents. Perhaps extracted without violence from a corpse.

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He saw the bloody spade on the floor, now more like a branch torn off long ago, dry and no longer budding, a staff perhaps, which could have belonged to Abraham to help him cross the desert, or perhaps, and more accurately, the rod that Paul left on a path after Christ's death and then blossomed. The staff had previously been a piece of branch, and the branch was the form into which the serpent descended from the tree. The serpent, after being defeated, was petrified by a miracle of God; then the same branch was buried and flourished again.

Can life, then, arise from the essence of sin? Is life a product of good or evil? Is life good in itself? Does good exist? Does God exist, or have we all been mistaken in our concepts since the very beginning of human reason? Is it all a deception so well perpetrated that we no longer remember that everything is a lie, and the truth has already been lost forever? Can truth be absolute? Concepts or entities, or a single, mixed thing that we humans want to see separated in order to understand them—in order to truly understand ourselves? Maximilian asked himself all these questions as he watched the handle of the shovel, curling and coiling like a snake trying to break out of its old skin, and the shovel itself was like the head of a flat,

wide snake. When he managed to escape the threat that was beginning to slither across the floor of that room that had belonged to him, he escaped through the door, briefly watching out of the corner of his eye how the snake climbed up Uncle José's body and raised its head, haughty and triumphant, emitting the hiss of its forked tongue.

He listened to the doors of the maids' rooms. The creaking of the hinges was as much a part of them as the creaking of their worn service clothes or the verberna scent of the perfume they used indiscriminately. He imagined them emerging from their rooms in their nightgowns covered by dark, thick bedskirts, their hair in curlers, or their nightcaps. He could even hear the sound of sandals on the rugs as they headed toward the foot of the stairs. They would have heard the sound of the doors slamming with his uncle's arrival. They didn't always get up when he was late, but he knew they stayed awake, each alone in her room, until they heard him arrive. Many times they would solemnly rebuke him for such nonsense during breakfast, and his uncle would silence them with a bang on the table, because he preferred that volcanic blow resonating only once in his head. He was overcome by a hangover, overwhelmed by all that moralizing gibberish from two old women who knew nothing about life.

If they got up this time, it must have been for a reason. They must have heard the sound of the shovel, or simply the tread of more feet than usual. Women usually have better hearing than men, and that didn't surprise him. He was used to hiding his nightly rounds around the house when he was a sleepless child, searching for food and drink in the kitchen. But even though he left no trace of having been there, they had hinted at him during breakfast the next morning, but with smiles and brusque caresses on the little one's cheeks.

Or maybe this time they had sensed something more, something to come, and that wasn't unusual either. It was good to have women in a house, he told himself, but it was also uncomfortable if one had something to hide. Then he wondered how much they knew about him and Uncle José. Maybe they kept quiet about what they knew. And his silence seemed complicit, even culpable in their eyes. Because we don't know the motives of adults, we tend to judge them more harshly than if we were the guilty ones. They must protect us, they must care for us, and their harm, even if it's only due to incompetence or negligence, is more culpable than deliberate cruelty, and that's how we tend to judge, Maximilian told himself. He didn't consider himself an exception. He saw himself as exceptional enough to allow himself the luxury of thinking or experiencing feelings other than those of ordinary people. If something set him apart from the ordinary, he had to do what was necessary to return to the flock. But every move he made to resemble the others only distanced him a little further, isolated him, subjected him to the constant scrutiny of those by whom he desired to feel the approval of: first, a lonely adolescent among books, with two overprotective old servants and an uncle who had taken him as a child-lover, first; then a frustrated young man, with two murders under his belt and perhaps more in the making.

So, when he realized that everything he would do was merely a step on a path marked by uncertainties, where the only certainty was discovering the new religion of his conscience: that God was nothing more than one of the many names for countless demons (a name for various powers, evils, entities perhaps governed by a power other than nature itself, whose rule was chaos and disorder alternating successively).

If it was a matter of survival, he would survive now.

He returned to the room. The snake was gone, only the shovel covered in dried blood and its straight, rusty handle next to his uncle's body. He looked for the lamp on the nightstand and scattered the kerosene throughout the room and the hallway. This time he could actually hear the old women's footsteps coming up the carpet, whispering. But suddenly they raised their voices, and he heard the scream of terror one of them let out upon smelling the unmistakable odor. By the time they reached the top step of the stairs, the fire had spread throughout the room and was invading the hallway, consuming carpets, furniture, and wallpaper. And what was life, Maximilian thought to himself as he escaped through the window, amid thoughts of anger and terror, of tears barely contained by fury, of anguish as a mortuary background, and the imperious but from the start unsuccessful desire to try to conquer evil with fire, which would be nothing more than conquering fire with more fire.

He fell onto the sidewalk. He got up and looked toward the first-floor window. The flames shattered the glass panes of the panel he hadn't opened when he jumped. The fragments flew around him, resembling drops of water that didn't refresh him. He heard the screams. He hadn't heard them, but felt them inside, because in reality he was imagining them, as accurately as many things in his life since he discovered, or opened his mind to the clarity of what his uncle had been doing to him since he was very young. When the mental barriers fell, everything was an abysmal clarity. A sharp line formed between before and after, which was crossed by suffering serious wounds, killing or leaving permanent scars.

His uncle's body must have been burning, and for a very brief moment, he felt pity. Was it perhaps his fault that he had killed Brother Aurelio the day before the night of fever when he remembered what he had done to his uncle? But you already knew, Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne, you already knew even if you didn't realize it, he said to himself, looking at the ravages of the fire. You saw him approaching the bed all that time and you let him. You didn't scream or hit him. You abandoned yourself like a lamb in his hands, you curled up in his chest feeling protected by the warmth of the down as if a big, strong bear were going to protect you for life. And the pain was real, as was the resentment and the anger. Guilt and despair, and above all, fear, that fear masterfully camouflaged among the books and inventions, within the four walls of the library, which transformed it, if not into something acceptable, at least tolerable, disguised as a dream, dissolving the framework of his reality with substances as corrosive as half-truths and the hypocritical certainty of pride.

He thought of that Goya etching that said something like reason generates monsters, and in his case, he was a monster, but he had to retain the appearance of a lamb. He had to overcome not only what harmed him, but everything that represented evil. The figure of the good Jesus should not appear in the eyes of those who didn't deserve it. Who was Uncle José to appropriate Jesus and deform him with his lies? Who was Brother Aurelio with his hallucinations of Christ-like spiders? Why couldn't he, Maximilian, see it if that way he would find, if not peace, at least the pride of feeling like a chalice overflowing with ecstasy?

Instead, and as compensation, he now felt like the bearer of a chalice whose contents, instead of blood, contained fuel, and instead of hosts, a sacramental fire of atonement. He raised his arms and clasped his hands as if raising that chalice in a divine offering, and murmured: *In nomine patris, filius et spiritus sanctus.*

He took steps back, his gaze taking in the burning facade of the mansion. The fire spread inside, the windows shattered, and the women's screams were like the wails of cats fighting in the night. Then they grew wilder and more distant as the crackling of the wood grew louder, like animals trapped in a burning forest within a city, each house a solitary, enclosed forest where a few inhabitants lived, beyond whose limits lay nothing but despair and emptiness. The cosmic abyss of impersonal paths, where passengers walked without faces or voices, only bodies whose memory was erased, transforming into ghosts of one's own imagination. Each house, too, was an asylum for psychiatric patients, each with their own mental straitjacket, their nightly dose of sedatives, their daytime stimuli, and their dreams of sex and death fulfilled in the uncertain zone before wakefulness.

The nearest neighbors were no less than two hundred meters away, and I could already see them approaching in their nightclothes and sandals over the cobblestones and the night dew. Maximiliano was still in his nightgown and robe, but barefoot. He had to hide. He, like the other inhabitants of the house, had to die. They wouldn't find the remains of his skeleton among the ashes, if they searched for him, because many would believe he was still at the seminary. But things were no better there; the flood would have swept away Brother Aurelius's body, and if by chance they had found it, no one would be surprised that Maximilian's body didn't appear. The torrent of water had been strong, just as the fire was now.

It was surprising even for himself to see himself in this light: like a bringer of catastrophe or a god ravaging the world. Like every god, he had to hide to preserve his power, because mystery was the greatest of all. When a human performed such feats, the weak shape of his body generated ridicule in the face of such powers, but if no one saw him, or if he was also considered already dead, then his power was unlimited. But what could he do with such power? What good could it do him, standing there as desolate as if he were completely naked and abandoned in the middle of a deserted city street? He could not or should not ask anyone for help; he didn't even know where to run or hide.

He only managed to escape in the opposite direction from which the others were approaching. He ran down that street, so familiar for so many years, until he reached less-frequented blocks, then almost unknown and dark. He had stopped running, but he walked restlessly, his feet cold and aching. He had tripped over trash cans, dodged cats that jumped at him from high walls of vacant lots, fled from dogs that tried to bite him. He was a night prowler who was not at all welcome. He encountered vagrants, lonely men who might have wanted to rob him, but seeing him dressed like that, they gave up. Some women of the night gave a slight chuckle of disdain. He didn't stop because he wasn't sure how much distance or time was enough to put what he'd done behind him. In reality, the events would remain in his head; they were present right now, it was inevitable, but what he needed to get away from was the immediate present, from space, more concrete and flimsy than time, perhaps. Who knows? At least places were interchangeable, unlike time, which revolved around itself and repeated itself tirelessly, in various variations composed by a mediocre musician. re.

Mediocrity: an attribute of God, he told himself. Creation was a far more complex product than the deranged mind of a god who found no better answer than to repeat the ancient sacrificial rites over and over again throughout his eternity.

He hid in an alley on the outskirts of Cádiz, beneath the window of a first-floor boarding house. Soon, its inhabitants would wake up to go to work in the fields, some to the city. He would smell the aroma of coffee and greasy buns, of boiled milk for the children, surely the sound of a newly awakened baby crying, and the screams of some women calling for their men to get them out of bed. The responses were always monotonous and at the same time irritated, exasperated, from those who had to sacrifice another day of their lives to what is not sleep but sorrow.

There was a laundry sink under a window, with several lines of clothes hanging on it. He undressed, thankful that the owners of the place didn't have dogs to betray him. He left his dirty clothes on the floor, and remained naked for a moment, squatting. He smelled his armpits, looked at his sooty hands, touched his injured feet, looked at his penis, which had risen without realizing it. Something excited him, not the situation, but what had happened, perhaps, the fire, the simile of a mass he had attempted like a blasphemer on the sidewalk outside the mansion. He felt, like a memory, the times he had been touched there: the whores with their rough hands and their moist mouths, the uncle with his soft hands and his coarse, irritating mouth. One hid the other, and that was how time passed and the memories mingled, and his memory, to protect him from madness, formed layer upon layer of an impermeable outer barrier. The layers deteriorated, the memories seeping in, forming damp patches in the shapes of monsters.

The madness might have been an uncontrollable flood: impossible to seal the source and find a drain.

The madness might have been an inextinguishable fire: impossible to put out and find an escape route.

He stole men's clothes. The light of dawn helped him choose them. The sound of dishes and pots from the kitchens accompanied his outfit: a pair of pants and a shirt. There were no shoes, but he would manage. He turned on the tap and washed as best he could while trying to avoid the sound of water on the sink tiles. Then he fled, because someone was opening the window. In the early morning light, he roamed the slums near the port. He found a homeless man and stole his almost new shoes, which he must have stolen in turn not many days before. He walked along the shore, looking at the anchored ships, loading merchandise with large cranes that raised their arms to the sky like skeletal priests on the seashore. Pondering these images, it occurred to him that perhaps they were not Catholic priests, because his imagination dressed them in colorful robes of uncertain origin, perhaps with feathers, and their bare torsos covered in symbolic paintings. He stopped in front of the shore and looked toward the horizon. The sea lay, perhaps, his next path. If flight was the only answer, what better way than to interpose the immensity of the sea between recent events and his future. He thought he heard the ritual chants of a pagan mass, the wild cries of a virgin forest. The recently dawned sun shone on the surface of the water, and suddenly he saw a transparency that surprised him. The small waves seemed to sing, and from them came those distant cries, like strange pagan masses he had read about in many religious books in Uncle José's library. He thought of the legends of the Greeks, of the gods of the sea, he thought of Atlantis, and he told himself that the bottom of the sea was the most suitable place for the refuge of gods who have secrets to hide. There they could build their temples without anyone knowing, hold their masses, and strew its vast depths with thousands of bones. Not just a continent, but an entire world inhabited by gods who have transformed into demons solely through solitude. Solitude brings frustration, and from this comes greed, and greed conjures up a schizophrenia that fluctuates between good and evil, cruelty and remorse. That, perhaps, was the story of God in relation to humans. Therefore, God was dead as a concept, as an idea, even as a feeling. Only faith was capable of maintaining his image, and faith fluctuates like a ship in an endless storm of doubt.

The idea of demons as multiple workers was more plausible for human understanding. Anything collective is more understandable than what is done by an individual: the latter's work was capricious, arbitrary, even deceptive. Only a group of individuals could found cities, create societies, construct and build myths that last longer than a single human life. And if these demons were gods, they were not free from human dichotomy, suddenly rebelling against the power of a God whose façade had collapsed, virtue vanished into nothingness, because whiteness can only be seen in contrast to darkness.

Darkness, then, was the quintessential space.

Maximilian decided, without further hesitation, to stay all day in the port. He would experience the virtues of night for the first time facing the sea, without walls in between, without concealment. His soul opened to the deep abyss, to see, glimpse, peer into worlds that already fascinated him even without having seen them yet.

The sun disappeared behind some lost clouds, eager to seize the sunset. The creaking of the cranes gave way to the shouts of sailors leaving their freshly washed and changed ships to spend a few hours in the port bars. Maximilian, sitting on a low wall that offered a privileged view of both the sea and the port, watched them pass very close, one next to the other, almost embracing but not yet drunk, eager for fun and women. Fatigue didn't show on their bodies or their faces, despite having worked since very early in the morning. No one looked up to see him sitting there, like a crow on the wall, watching over the men's fate. No one saw his grim gaze, his hunched body.

He stayed there for several hours. He saw some returning to the ships. Others would spend the night in brothels. He wished, for a moment, that he were one of them, no different from the others except in his body, and one in spirit and mind with the others. But he knew it could never be like that, that he was a crow on the wall, observant and expectant, and not one of those who suffered the decisions of others. That was over forever. Watching them descend the embankment toward the shore in the moonlight, he realized, only then, how the moon, now full and complete, whose stench could even be clearly smelled, lay almost above the surface of the sea, reflecting itself in the waters like a witch trying to convince herself of her beauty before a distorting mirror. It was like another moon, in fact, a twin with its own independent mobility.

Suddenly, the water moon broke apart, slowly splitting into hundreds of fragments, like shards separating not so much in length as in depth. The twin moon was breaking, and he looked up to make sure the real one was still whole. It was, but the water moon was sinking, and then he saw movements on the surface, as if heavy things were falling and raising small waves, causing ripples in expanding circles that reached the shore.

He looked around, but no one was there. Things kept falling, and the sound of the water, that dripping patter, grew with the breeze that carried it from one place to another, expanding it, enlarging it. The moonbeams reflected in the water didn't stay still; they rose and fell with the waves, but they also rose higher than expected, and then abruptly dropped, their speed increased by the height they had reached, almost as if an additional force had been applied to them, the force exerted by someone to push them. Because they were concrete and heavy things, though not too heavy, things that, when they fell to the surface, sank under the force of the fall, just a little, and soon tended to float. However, they never returned to the surface.

He climbed down the wall, walked to the riverbank, and climbed onto a piling where the ropes of some barges were tied. Behind the illuminated surface of the water, he saw movements, as if the sometimes silver, sometimes gold fragments of the moon were lamps descending to illuminate the movements of aquatic workers. He thought he saw arms underwater, extended like those of cranes, but without their mechanized and almost static motion. Living arms, voluntarily moving, grasping those things of various sizes and shapes and carrying them to the bottom of the

sea, disappearing into the now definitive darkness that no light in the world could ever illuminate.

Maximilian rubbed his tired eyes and looked at the sky. The true moon had risen a little, and he discovered the figures that many men had observed on its surface for millennia: that kind of rabbit, that ball. Each civilization had given them its own interpretation, and now for him they were simply an animal and a circle that could just as easily be anything else. Of both forms, only the circle offered a more flexible symbolism. It occurred to him, then, that it could well be a spot of disease on the moon, an open boil, a bullet wound. Maybe it was a hole, an excavation.

But what if it was a fracture?

Maximilian made associations. He thought of the Easter Bunny, the resurrection of Christ, the pCircular stonework covering the cave where the body was laid to rest for three days.

Perhaps God's dwelling place.

The hole in the broken bone of the moon.

Through that space, the long-buried bones of God were now falling into the water. Jesus had risen, but for this, his Father had to die.

Jesus, triumphant, had made the earth his domain, and the sea his temple.

He lived off the bones of his father, who would forever descend from the moon, at least until it was destroyed by some natural cause. Jesus was no longer nature, nor the son of God, nor the savior of the world. But the entity that lived in the sea with the thousands of forms of angels and demons expelled from heaven by God's merciless intransigence. The armies of demons had killed the Father and lived off his bones, building temples, cemeteries, and entire cities beneath the surface of the sea.

From there, the end of time would come. Not from the sky, but from the sea that would one day dry up completely, revealing in all their splendor the cities once dead but then forever alive and shining with the gold of angels turned demons, no longer innocent but conspicuous and skeptical, no longer beautiful but sensually irreverent, no longer wise but rabidly intelligent. The continents would then be only uninhabited and deserted mountains, obsolete monuments to post-Flood monsters.

Maximilian had to see with his own eyes, at least for once, that power in the figure of Christ peering out from the fracture of a bone. He promised himself this with the same firmness that was anchored in the root of the anger that had driven him to that moment.

In the morning, he woke up with the sun on his face, huddled among the broken cobblestones. He headed toward a large steel ship with tall funnels that sent out long columns of smoke. A ship that would soon depart for America. He would use the sea as a bridge to discover the movements at the bottom of the sea, the fall of God's bones nourishing its inhabitants. It would be like sharing, in some way, the glory that finally emerged from the chaos of history.

TREPANNING AND AMPUTATION AS MAN'S DESIGN

19

This time it wasn't the sea, but the river. A river much larger than he would have imagined had he thought about the journey he had undertaken. While the ocean voyage had been long, often unbearable, everything that happened on the ship had made time almost imperceptible during the last few weeks. His illness, his fever, and the knowledge of Elsa and his father had been things too intense not to astonish him and occupy his every thought. Thus, time passed much faster than the long miles of water and more water to the continent that awaited him.

But the river was something else. A kind of immensely long viper that slithered through the dense undergrowth on the banks, and only found itself in the first few kilometers from the mouth, crossing the delta into which another, much wider and stranger river opened, a freshwater sea they called the Río de la Plata. A river he didn't fully understand and that accepted the waters of other rivers that rose hundreds of kilometers to the north, not from mountains as was common in his homeland, but from elevated plains, teeming with vegetation of all colors, as dense as the jungle, teeming with wild animals, mosquitoes, disease, traffickers, in short, death in various forms.

He had inquired about the region of the Indians he was to find. He had introduced himself to the captain as a Jesuit seminarian coming on a mission of evangelical aid. The captain, an old Argentinian, virile even at his advanced age, with broad shoulders, a strong chest, and thick hair, who that afternoon was helping to load provisions for his small crew, had looked at him strangely. He spat his cigarette into the calm water at the edge of the dock and questioned him with his gaze, Maximiliano guessing the silent comment: the days of evangelization had long since passed. The silence, however, was broken by the captain's harsh voice.

"Now the Indians are dying of hunger, but they keep buying weapons from the traffickers. They kill each other while practicing witchcraft. The old churches have collapsed. They're promiscuous, you know, young man, and when it comes to women, they kill at least half of them when they're born. I've seen them, believe me; they put them in the river and drown them. Then they wrap them in palm leaves and let the little bodies drift away with the current."

Then the old man looked at Maximiliano's companion. He was another old man like him, but weaker, taller, and bent over. Don Roberto seemed to smell the river air, the eternal humidity invading the wood of the small boat, the sound of the leaves on the shore moved by the wind, the shouts of the men on the dock, the barking of the dogs, and even the hissing of the snakes that could be clearly heard when the sound of the

water subsided in the early afternoon, after noon. Maximiliano didn't know how complete Don Roberto's blindness was. It was assumed that it was only in his left eye, but over time at the lazaretto, he had noticed that he had begun to see poorly on his right side as well, or at least that was what the old man said and what he had observed in the glassy, vacant look in both eyes. He noticed how the captain was watching them, perhaps wondering why a seminarian would go on an evangelizing trip to the coastal jungle accompanied by an old man who didn't seem to be able to take care of himself. Then he found in this the most plausible reason to give the situation the most convenient appearance.

"This is my father, Captain, the two of us are alone in the world. I couldn't abandon him in the hands of strangers." Besides, he wouldn't have forgiven me for leaving him alone in the city.

The captain nodded, finally disengaging from the conversation and returning to the tasks that required him, namely, loading merchandise to sell and distribute to the various towns and cities along the banks of the Paraná River, and preparing the ship. They would depart in two hours at the most, around four in the afternoon. Maximiliano and Don Roberto were sitting in torn leather chairs that the captain had offered them because they were two passengers, if not wealthy financially, then respectable for their ecclesiastical and human authority. It was a cargo ship, with only two or three cabins for transporting passengers. When Maximiliano arrived at that dock in the delta after traveling south through the city of Buenos Aires, searching for transportation across vast fields where cows and horses grazed along the sides of the road, and asking hundreds of times for the contacts Valverde had carefully indicated on a note he carried in the inside pocket of his suit jacket—the same one the ship's doctor had given him—he felt he had endured more hardship and time than the entire sea voyage. But it was only the beginning of a journey that, he knew very well, would be more dangerous and difficult because it was in his inexperienced hands to avoid getting lost. He was young and had never left the city limits of Cádiz in his entire life, and after leaving it, he only knew one ship that did nothing more than guide him in a specific direction. He had nothing to decide during that entire journey, nothing to reflect on or deduce. His decisions had been solely personal, as if he'd been in a cell his entire life, and now he had to decide before a world he didn't know, a space that was much broader, more intriguing, and stranger, from the climate to the people who inhabited it, not to mention the food, the customs, the accent of a language that was his own and yet not his.

He thought about all this as he sat there on deck, his few belongings already packed in the cabin they shared, watching the sailors coming and going as they carried crates and bags up and down the wooden ramp that connected the ship to the dock. He listened to the shouts and insults, which didn't bother him because he barely understood their meaning. He watched the men's burly bodies and their indecipherable gibberish of tattoos and obscene gestures. The captain reprimanded them from time to time, and although he didn't see it, he understood from the tone of his reprimand that he was referring to the presence of the two passengers, whom the old man considered special. They weren't traveling salesmen, nor women of the

social order, nor children who attended a provincial school several kilometers upriver. They were a seminarian and his elderly father, of Spanish origin, from the Motherland, as he had heard him say when he introduced himself earlier that day.

Maximiliano remembered, however, as the afternoon sun fell, abruptly hiding behind the thickets of immense trees, whose branches intertwined in multiple embraces that he guessed were impossible to break, casting a premature and cool shadow over the river, Elsa's face when they said goodbye. They were on the street, after the doors of the lazaretto had opened for them. There were no police officers at the door this time, only the health inspector represented by the old, outdated doctor who had been posted there to verify compliance with the quarantine periods. He carried a temporary ID in his pocket that identified them as Maximiliano Méndez Iribarne and his wife. The change in his last name didn't bother him as it would have on other occasions: he was a different man now, he knew it, or at least he needed to be and feel like one, and a change in his real name was a good start.

Roberto was beside them, waiting with his gaze raised, perhaps seeing the bell towers of the nearby churches in the darkness, or the doves crossing the Buenos Aires sky, all accompanied, of course, by the essential sounds of the bells and their fluttering wings, deeply embedded in the air like thorns that pricked old Roberto's invisible and sensitive skin. He himself had mentioned them when he went out into the street: bells and doves, as if they were the only things to see and hear in the city. Perhaps they were also the only things he saw with his right eye, like a thematic complement to the irreverent religiosity of the constant presence in his left. Because although he hadn't said anything about it since they left Spain, Don Roberto's Jesus was as present as his own body in that new city.

Elsa and I had kissed for many minutes, had embraced with longing and sadness, even with despair at having to separate. Now she wore the silver cross Valverde had returned to her around her neck, with a certain disdain she thought she sensed in his gesture when he handed her the other half of the payment for her services.

"Sell it, Elsa, you can use it to rent a decent room until we return."

"I'm not going to do that. Not only is it a souvenir for you, my love, but if it's really as valuable as Valverde told you, I'd sell it for a pittance. Besides, I want you to wear it to protect them on the journey."

Elsa began to cry. She was afraid, she said, that she wouldn't be able to communicate with them.

"I'll send you notices from whatever port we're in, don't worry. I'll send them to the central post office, and you'll come pick them up every week. When you have a definitive address, let me know. Maybe we'll already be settled among the natives."

"But how will you know where to go?"

"We've already spoken with Valverde about that." There is a fairly isolated town in the province of Misiones where they continue to perform the cures we are seeking for our father.

Elsa smiled and hugged him even more tightly, wetting Maximiliano's unique and already worn clothes with her tears. But the scent of Elsa's tears was more precious than the smell of clean soap. He could still perceive it now that he and Roberto were on the deck of the small boat, which was beginning to pull away from the dock with the loud groans of chains, wood, ropes lashed like whips, and the incomprehensible cries of men accustomed to the river as the axis of their lives. Vertical lives that contemplated only two possible paths: up and down. Lives similar, in fact, to those of the pious men he would have wanted to imitate if he had been allowed another choice in his life. The vertical life, and not the horizontal labyrinth of intertwined paths like the branches of the trees and bushes he saw passing by as the boat moved upstream. Dark lattices, home to cold and hunger, refuge for beasts.

Green hell.

The days passed slowly along a river unknown to him, but which, like all rivers, was repeatedly a succession of shores and currents. The novelty of the banks, abundant with flora, gradually faded over the first week, especially since they stopped only at flimsy docks, where the few inhabitants of small towns, and sometimes just villages or hamlets, waited in a sing-song attitude for the arrival of the boat that would bring them food, wooden planks to repair their rickety huts, and the occasional passenger going from one town to another. Occasionally, the captain would tell his distinguished passengers how he thought of Maximiliano and Don Roberto, leaning against the hatch, a proverbial and obligatory pipe, almost always half-extinguished, sticking out of the side of his mouth. His words seemed barely murmured, but which Maximiliano understood more by association, with a peculiar interpretation given to him by the old captain's gaze, his barely moving lips, the gestures of his hands, and, above all, the playful yet brutal atmosphere of the river they were traveling along.

For a moment, it occurred to him that they were like crew members of a Leviathan humbly placed in a South American river, which little by little was revealing itself to be disturbing with its sometimes nauseating, other times curiously fascinating odors, as if the aroma of meat cooked by the villagers rose from the waters, or from them. Fish flesh, almost always, mixed with the aroma of the filthy bodies of children with swollen bellies who peeked out from the thicket and followed the boat's passage for meters and meters, often kilometers, shouting with shrill voices and mischievous smiles, throwing pebbles that barely reached half the distance between them and the boat. The captain always greeted them by blowing the deep, thumping horn, and then the children would stop and wave their hands, and every now and then one whoNo one would throw himself into the water and try in vain to reach the ship.

It was on one of these occasions that the first tragedy of the voyage occurred. The captain had already told Maximiliano that parents had a

hard time trying to prevent their children from doing this, but how could they control them if they had more than numerous offspring and spent the day working in the ports or factories in the interior of the province, while many others hunted or fished. In short, the children did what they wanted, and Don Roberto then laughed, and they both looked at him in surprise, because it was almost the only expression of pleasure he had shown since they set sail.

"Does it remind you of your childhood, Don Roberto?" the captain asked.

"I remember my daughter... I couldn't stop her when she was a child; she would run through the fields all day, sometimes not seeing her until late at night. When I would angrily ask him where he had been, he would begin a long story from the moment he had left home in the early hours of the morning." And she fell asleep in my arms even before she'd finished telling me. I carried her to bed, where her dogs kept her company, also exhausted. But I had no way of asking them, of course... and I settled for stroking their heads and closing the door. And before dawn, she was already preparing breakfast with the milk she had milked half an hour before the sun rose or the rooster crowed.

Don Roberto stared into the distance over the surface of the river in front of the bow, and Maximiliano later realized the incongruity of the old man's story compared to the lie they had to maintain before the captain. Don Roberto had agreed to simulate filial kinship, accepting the need to make things easier in an already complex situation. But now his nostalgia for Elsa had led him down paths that didn't suit them at that moment.

The captain approached the old man and waved his right hand in front of Don Roberto's eyes.

"You can't see anything anymore, can you?" he asked Maximiliano.

"He's gotten much worse, it's true. Why do you ask?"

"Because my wife had that same vacant look when our son died. He fell overboard twenty years ago, and since then she's stayed at my house in Paraná. When I come back, she always repeats the same thing, looking at the river, and she blames me because my boy fell in the first day I took him to teach him the trade."

The captain remained lost in his thoughts, and Maximiliano would have liked to console him, to offer him at least a word related to the profession he boasted about on that voyage. But it was certain that no one expected such a thing from a student, even if he were a seminarian. Old people expect nothing more than a listening ear, not empty words that would ring in the void.

However, the captain's mind soon snapped out of its reverie, and he surprised him with a question:

"You didn't tell me you had a sister..."

Maximiliano was startled because he had convinced himself that enough time had passed for an explanation. Looking away from a boy who was swimming toward the ship at that very moment, he replied:

"My sister stayed behind to look after our house, Captain."

"And how was the boy behaving?" he asked Don Roberto.

An answer required a blatant lie, and he knew that's not what Don Roberto wanted to do. But at that moment, a rather cruel God conceived a chaotic situation to come to the aid of Maximiliano, who was a young Don Quixote, walking the roads of the world defending a heavenly glory that was slowly becoming dark and twisted, but undoubtedly worthy of the highest dramatic genius. For that's what Maximilian later thought it could be described as, lying in his cabin and listening to the silence sung by the crickets, anchored in the waves of the waters against the bow, and descending from the trees filled with gloomy funeral songs, as if it weren't birds singing but old mourners around a coffin. Many times at night, this thought occurred to him: that the ship was an enormous coffin dragged by the waters, against the current, as if death were taking an inverted path, reversing itself, transforming itself, lying in his cabin, feeling the pounding of the waves almost on the floor beneath his back, much more clearly than in the ocean he had crossed.

He didn't have to answer, because the captain suddenly shouted and ran to starboard, demanding his rifle. The sailors also ran and began throwing stones into the water, while one of them brought the captain's rifle. Maximiliano didn't understand what was happening, fascinated by the figure of the old man with his weapon like an expert hunter. He recalled the books he had read in Uncle José's library, he remembered the travel stories his uncle had told, not to him, but to the visitors. The hunting tools, the trophies he had brought back: horns, tusks, teeth, skins.

Then he saw, in the river, the turbulent waters, flowing and creating beams of light as the sun set and emerged from the waves stirred by the boy he had seen diving a few minutes earlier, and of whom he could only see his arms and head poking desperately above the surface of the water. Not because he was drowning, and that's why he didn't understand at first, because the reflection of the light on the turbulent river blinded him. Following the direction of the men's arms pointing at something in the river, he saw an elongated head, almost entirely green. Soon he saw the alligator in its entire length, swimming toward the boy, faster than him. It was enough to look at it all as if it were a play, the work of a great playwright called God, whom Maximilian knew not for his goodness but for his exquisite cruelty. If God were dead, these were perhaps the arbitrary acts the rebel angels used to rally around the caiman, a power not even their own leader would have dared to seek.

The captain fired many times, but the bullets splashed the water around the caiman, without killing him. Maximiliano heard the old man shout insults from the rooftops, many so unfamiliar that he didn't understand. The captain insisted on reloading his weapon and firing again and again. A couple of sailors jumped in to help the boy, but the distance was further

than expected, and the caiman was getting closer. So, when he was no less than ten meters away, they stopped and turned toward the boat, without getting in, as if his presence in the water somewhat assuaged the guilt they felt. They looked up at the captain; we were all looking at him, on the boat and from the shore, the other naked children and the few adults, an old man and three topless women, uttering desperate cries.

Maximiliano turned his gaze back to the water. The alligator opened its enormous mouth, baring its teeth like a demon sprung from the depths, because until then it had remained just a little below the surface, avoiding revealing its full size to the captain and his bullets. The boy's body sank into the water and entered the animal's mouth as if taken by an abyss. That was what the river looked like, which soon darkened first with the color of blood, then of mud, then the color of silence that lay over the waters like a sleeping monster. It wasn't the first time it had happened, nor the first the crew had witnessed. The captain lowered his rifle and banged it against the rail. "Old gun," he said through gritted teeth, "fucking old gun made of shit," he repeated. The women wept, the other children gazed at the tinged water as if it were something marvelous. The sailors returned to their work, and the ship continued its advance upstream. Maximilian made the sign of the cross and muttered a learned litany, which arose like a reflex, as swift in the instant as the emergence of the captain's gun had been. But neither would be effective: neither saved nor consoled. He knew that there was no salvation in expiating sins, and that consolation was no more useful than the task of throwing dust on the dead. He turned his back on the river and looked at Don Roberto. He had heard everything, surely much more clearly than them, and had perhaps seen the dance of reflections on the water, following the rhythm of the ancestral music of the cries. Then he realized he was covering his eyes. Maximiliano thought he was crying.

"Calm down..."

When he tried to take his hands from his face, the old man's left eye was clear and shining like the sun on the choppy water; he could even see the waves rising with the force of the boy's and the animal's bodies. It was a flash that lasted an indeterminate amount of time, which was immediately reversed. But the left eye was no longer opaque with the cloud it had acquired during his time in the leper house. The blindness was now white, if indeed it was such a blindness. He wanted to ask the old man if he had seen anything, but doing so would have been like questioning a judge about the nature of his sentence. What was living in his left eye was capable of seeing beyond the deepest depths; it was, perhaps, capable of creating depth and even illuminating it. Maximilian looked away from the old man, as if he had discovered the old man's nakedness. But in reality, he looked away so as not to commit blasphemy, repeating a bow that would have seemed more like mockery than adoration. The light of the world would always be opaque to him from then on, and it was the shroud he would wrap himself in, like a shield or a weapon, to defend himself from the luminous abyss he was obliged to eradicate.

And the days became a gentle murmur of calm waters and wind piercing the foliage on the banks. A brutal sun fell like molten lead on the deck. The breezeIn the morning, the air turned into stagnant air, carrying the scent of rotting fish on the distant sand, because the river was widening upstream. In the afternoon, Maximiliano and Don Roberto cloistered themselves in their makeshift cabin, actually a storage room with two bunks and two basins of water that they changed every two days, as well as a single chamber pot that they shared so they wouldn't have to use the same bathroom as the crew if they had to get up during the night. But there was no alternative but to use it, of course, and sometimes Maximiliano was forced to go while a sailor was also there, but neither of them looked at the other, nor did they speak except to say good morning or good night. There was no nudity that shamed them; the shame was only in their own minds, he knew that very well. Everyone believed he was a Jesuit, but they didn't treat him any differently. They didn't believe he was beyond the needs of all men, the desires and virtues, the mistakes and even the horrors that spill into each one's dreams at night. They greeted him with respect but cast knowing glances when they gathered to play cards in their spare time, or when they began to sing, drunk, on the deck until the early hours of the morning, while the river flowed silently on those muggy nights, where only alcohol and lustful thoughts made the heat bearable, because they made him merge with their own bodies, as if they were the sources of the heat and not its victims.

It was on one of those nights that he heard them talking, as he went out on deck because he couldn't sleep. He left Don Roberto on his bunk, as always with his blind gaze directed toward the ceiling and his left eye half-closed, unsure whether he was asleep or awake. He put on a pair of pants and boarded bare-chested, prepared to endure the mosquitoes and horseflies, which ultimately didn't bother him as much because the abundant perspiration coated his body with an almost protective sweat.

The men were gathered in the stern, four or five of them, by the light of a lamp in the middle of their patrol. The reflection of their eyes could be seen on the bottles, and the cards cast long shadows on the deck. He heard laughter, and the conversation took shape in his ears. They were talking about the weather, about how the rains would come very soon. The captain had ordered provisions and rigging to be prepared for a strong storm, which would perhaps approach tomorrow, or at the latest the day after.

"We should reach Paraná by noon, then, to protect ourselves in the port," said one. The others nodded and rejoiced at the prospect, but it wasn't just because of the storm.

"The same pretty whores await us in the city tomorrow," the same man said as before, laughing, and a clinking of bottles revealed the toast that represented his joy.

Maximiliano looked at the crescent moon, which was setting and rapidly detaching itself from the clouds that stood between it and the world it sought to illuminate. The white bone of the moon from which bones fell at night. He had seen them fall the day before, but he was so used to it that they no longer caught his attention. From the day he saw that flash in Don Roberto's eye, he knew that the ghost of God was with him, the ghost who needed to atone for his sins by surrendering his bones to stronger powers, making the terrible concession of his own body in order to regain the life and power he had lost, like a wasteful businessman who had made very bad investments and dismissed from his heavenly offices the most capable and intelligent employees, the very ones who, through that same intelligence, could elevate or destroy him.

He thought of the city he didn't know: Paraná. It sounded like a jungle to him, like an aborigine, but it couldn't have been that. Perhaps a large village with adobe houses, because he couldn't imagine that in the middle of all that jungle the cement of civilization could emerge. Nature was undoubtedly always stronger, and his own instincts showed him so. Now he felt a longing he couldn't evade for long. He missed Elsa, and he leaned on the railing, looking at the surface of the water right next to the boat, and that flow reminded him of the dampness on Elsa's intimate body, the glide of his hands over her.

He looked at the men, who had noticed his presence. He thought they were calling him.

"Come, Father," one of them, perhaps the oldest, said without respect but with the tenderness of a drunkard.

Maximilian approached without saying anything. The others watched him, and he assumed they had known what he had been thinking for a while. They exchanged glances. Maximiliano, without lowering his eyes, made an internal account of what he could be demonstrating without realizing it, but it was evident that the sweat betrayed him, the drops of perspiration on his forehead and heart accelerated.

"If you like, Father, join us tomorrow... the young ladies know how to make you feel good," said the old man, and the others laughed quietly, almost secretly, perhaps doubting the young seminarian's reaction.

"I don't think, my friends, that my duty to God allows it, but I'll share a little of the liquor with you, if you'll allow me."

The men stood up and patted him, pushing him into the narrow space around the lamp. They passed the bottles around, talking about everything, but they wanted to know about Spain, about what the seminary was like. Then one asked:

"And how do you manage when you're hungry for women?"

The oldest interrupted to say:

"What disrespectful questions for a cultured young man like our Father! Everyone knows they manage on their own, or among themselves."

And the old man's laughter echoed across the deck, echoed by the others, who were now so drunk they were laughing at anything, even Maximilian's stunned face. His silence wasn't misinterpreted, but rather as a sign of naiveté.

"Don't worry, Father, before the old sissies from the seminary get the better of you, you'll learn what real women are like." He leaned close to his ear and began instructing him on how to behave with them. Then he said to his friends:

"It's done, tomorrow you'll behave like a man."

Everyone celebrated by passing around another of the several bottles hidden under the pulleys and ropes. Maximilian got up to leave, and everyone did the same. It was time to go to bed and sleep, to stagger away the drunkenness for the early morning. The oldest went with him, holding onto his arm, staggering and muttering under his breath. Suddenly, he stopped and looked at the clouds that covered the moon. "There'll be a storm tomorrow, and the captain will be mad at us for docking in the city on time. But we'll have a great time tomorrow, my son," he said, patting him on the back with two sharp thuds. "We'll unwind and be calm for a while. The heat is like the electricity that's building up with this storm. Isn't that true?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He went into the room where the sailors slept, some on the floor and others in bunks. He fell on his side and began to snore. Maximiliano passed among the sleepers and went to his cabin. He lay down again, hoping to finally fall asleep. But the alcohol had awakened him more, had excited his imagination, and he felt the need to satisfy himself. He looked at Don Roberto, a meter away from him, his eyes open. He tried hard to hold on. He didn't know what he was going to do the next day. He was only sure of the electricity flowing around the ship, emanating from the river waters, which were beginning to ripple as if attracted by magnets in the sky. Without needing to look at them, he knew that clouds worked more effectively hidden like this than revealing themselves completely like cheap whores. The best ones, he told himself, as if he had learned it from the sailors a little while earlier, are the ones that seduce with a single touch of their hands in the right place and at the right time, the ones that hit the mark because they smell the perfume that emanates from a man, and a man unwittingly smells the moist conscience that dwells between a woman's legs.

The moon and its cracks.

Death and its folds.

The day dawned cloudy and cold. A southerly wind was pushing the ship northward, so by mid-afternoon they were already in Paraná. By that time, the wind was already too strong, and the rain was falling in heavy drops that echoed on the river with a sound so intense it muffled the sailors' usual voices as they docked. They had to fight the wind to leave the ship well protected in the harbor.

The city was just that, a large city on the banks of the wide river. From several kilometers ahead, the banks cleared of vegetation could be seen, the appearance of factories, sawmills, shipyards, poor houses, and cattle grazing along the riverbanks. Goats, cows, sick dogs, poor children, women washing clothes, men fishing. A crowd seemed to emerge from nowhere after miles of jungle.

Maximilian felt a certain relief, as if no longer feeling alone in the middle of nowhere was enough to give him the longed-for sense of being one among many others. What he couldn't bear was the feeling of being different, of having a different and greater responsibility weighing on him. A fence that would isolate him from others, a filter that would choose what he should see, penetrating the ultimate reality of things and people. Lost in the crowd, he felt safer, but he knew that such certainty wouldn't last long.

It was six in the evening when the ship was finally properly rigged at the dock. The dock workers greeted the captain like an old coward acquaintance. They talked for a long time on the dock, while Maximilian watched them from the deck, waiting for permission to disembark. The sailors did the same, nervous because they knew they still had the task of unloading what they were supposed to deliver to the city, and perhaps bringing up provisions for the rest of the voyage. But this last bit would probably be left for the next day, considering that there were only a few hours of daylight left, and the storm was already clouding the sky, further darkening the impending twilight.

Finally, the captain gave the signal to disembark. The men disembarked and opened the doors to the warehouses. In less than an hour, they left the crates and bags on the dock; the dock workers would take care of taking them to the storerooms. The captain shouted something to them with a broad smile, and Maximilian guessed he was praising them.

"Are you always so quick and diligent when the storm hits?" asked a port official, who perhaps didn't know them.

"More than the storm," said the captain, "it's the women who are pressing them." Then he raised his gaze to Maximilian and called him.

"Come down, Father!"

Maximilian disembarked and greeted them both.

"You and Don Roberto will be my guests tonight."

"There's no need to bother yourself about us, Captain..."

"Of course not! You're not going to stay on the ship in the coming storm. I'll accommodate you in my house. My wife will be happy to have someone."

"I don't want to bother you..."

"Listen to me, Father. Take it as a favor, I beg you. I already told you about my wife; she's alone so much that your visit, especially from a priest, will console her from many troubles. Believe me... I'll beg you if necessary..."

Maximilian looked for a moment at the sailors he had been with last night. He shook his head free of his bad thoughts and accepted the proposal. He returned to the ship to look for Don Roberto. They gathered the only belongings they had, a light suitcase with two changes of clothes each. When they reached the dock, Don Roberto breathed a sigh of relief, and the others smiled with joy.

"I'm glad to see this break in the journey is giving you relief from the confinement, Don Roberto."

"That's right, Captain," he replied. His left eye was still white. The captain noticed, but said nothing.

They climbed into a cart pulled by a handsome but old horse, like an ancient vestige of times long gone. It was almost incongruous with the landscape of that city, where the dilapidated port mingled with new and still useless buildings, others precarious and dripping with poverty. The captain, now far from his position, seemed like a simple villager, taking the reins of the cart and urging the animal on with constant, gentle warnings. "The old bay horse is easily distracted. It belonged to my son, and I haven't wanted to sell it, you understand. And so that it doesn't become stuck in a stable, I keep it in shape this way. I rarely use the cart, and my wife almost never. Only the girl who helps her with the chores takes it out to go downtown for shopping."

Maximilian nodded silently, concentrating on observing the surroundings of the city, which was taking shape as they entered more populated streets. Warehouses, motorized cars recently brought from Europe, many carts of course, new factories belching smoke from their tall chimneys.

"It's time for the workers to leave," said the captain, pointing to the group dispersing from a large lot adjacent to a square building with two enormous chimneys like dead trunks from a burnt forest.

And that image was repeated along several streets, then disappeared among newly built family homes, packed together, almost glued to one another. Maximiliano had an image of a domino that any wind would soon knock over. He looked up at the sky; the clouds were darker; the wind had brought them, and there were so many of them that they now remained stagnant, accumulating, threatening to spill their contents at any moment.

"This is the immigrant neighborhood." He also looked up at the sky and said, "We'll be there soon. My house is behind that lot you see over there." He pointed to a large vacant lot covered in weeds. A few minutes later, he saw the house hidden by the tall grass. It was an old ranch, wide and low, surrounded around its perimeter by a wooden gallery. The pillars formed a porch, shading the doors and windows with wooden shutters, behind which could be seen the delicate shapes of white curtains stained by time and flies. There were no trees around, only a vast pasture that didn't seem to bother anyone, as if it were a means of concealment from strangers. The wind had stopped, and the grass stopped moving, taking the form of a calm, serene sea, overcast by the large clouds that grew, thickened, inexorably.

The horseHe went deeper into the grounds and stopped in front of the house. The captain got out, and together they helped Don Roberto. Then he grabbed his own things and their suitcase, taking the beaten-earth path that led to the entrance. They followed him slowly, unsure of being welcomed by the lady of the house. As they climbed the short steps, they found themselves in almost darkness under the shadow of the arcade. Maximiliano heard the door open, and a faint light from an oil lamp suddenly emerged, more like mist than light, outlining the form of a young woman beneath the lintel. He heard the voice say:

"Welcome, Captain..." And he stopped when he saw strangers.

The captain ignored the greeting and indicated that they should enter.

"Please come in."

The living room was crammed with antique, dusty furniture, much of it covered with slipcovers and woven blankets. He saw cowhides, perhaps goatskins, and other animal skins on the floor. There was a cold, dry hearth, with embers that had perhaps been extinguished long before. It felt damper and colder inside than outside. A penetrating smell of animals, wet fur, and ammonia. Then a quasi-pack of cats appeared through a door that opened in the right-hand wall. Behind them, which spread throughout the room, ignoring the visitors, appeared the captain's wife. She approached with a calm stride across the room, dodging the furniture and chairs, the furs, the cat food dishes, clicking her heels on the creaking old and tired wood.

"My dear, these are my guests for tonight. Brother Maximiliano Méndez Iribarne and his father, Don Roberto. They will take shelter tonight from the storm before continuing on to the missions."

The woman seemed surprised by such an incongruity in these times, as much or more than the captain had been upon first meeting them. But soon that impression would be corrected by a more accurate cause: what had given the woman's face such an expression was something else, perhaps what she saw, invisible, surrounding or immersed in Maximilian's soul. Because there was no other way to express it. That face of a mature woman, over fifty years old, aged by grief, thin, with marked cheekbones where the shadow seemed to have been sculpted into her bones, was undoubtedly more intelligent and intuitive than the charitable and kind, and undoubtedly simple, soul of her husband.

She wore a brown dress, in the European fashion of fifteen or twenty years earlier, more monastic than appropriate for a cultured, upper-class lady. That was what her face sang, the aged remains of a nobility forever extinguished, alienated by transient and always unsuccessful rebellions, finally defeated and cloistered by its own choice in that bitter expression that denoted, more than her face, her entire figure. She wasn't tall, she wasn't erect; she wasn't boastful, unfriendly, or contemptuous. She was slightly bent, with slightly trembling hands that she rested one on top of the other, like two wayward children she had to constantly control. Then she said, with the gentle voice of a tired bird:

"You are very welcome." And she approached to greet Don Roberto first, as befitted her age, but which Maximiliano felt was an evasive act toward him.

She observed the old man's vacant gaze and smiled. Then she looked at Maximiliano and shook his hand. A shiver ran down his arm when he touched her. She was cold, rather icy. Her clear, intense green eyes reminded him of two flies perched on a loaf of white butter recently taken out of the freezer.

"My name is Natacha," she said, and that name coincided with a tired accent that, like almost everything in that house, was dredged up like a corpse of past glories. "My wife is Polish, she came with the first wave of immigrants back in the sixties, before everyone else arrived."

"That's right," she affirmed. "My family settled around here on a beautiful farm." She sighed, saddened, resigned to repeating something for the umpteenth time, yet still eagerly awaiting it: "All that's left is this house and that pasture you saw outside." But rather than showing sorrow and a sense of poverty, her tone denoted a dogged, final pride, as if the house were a fortress and the pasture an unassailable sea protecting it from the rest of the world.

Then Maximilian saw the crosses hanging on the walls, the rosaries of black beads, swaying aimlessly, like the feathers of stuffed birds. Or was it not? he wondered, as the woman spoke to him now, all seated in armchairs covered with the skins of spotted cows, about the need for religion in those places abandoned by God's mercy.

"There are no churches worth visiting in the city, no proper religious services. Everything is triviality, crime, poverty without dignity and honesty."

Her husband looked at her happily; it was evident that the visits had been an unusual expression had resurfaced in his wife, but that impression was soon erased. Looking at him straight on, then lowering her gaze, she said:

"Since you took my son, I've only had God and this house. And your occasional visit, of course."

Maximilian understood the insult, but not the other part of the sentence. Still, it was enough to move the men present, in solidarity with the captain. He stood up, but at his wife's gaze, he sat back down. He hadn't stopped putting down his suitcase, ready to go take a bath and rest. But he couldn't, yet.

"Maria, bring some tea for the gentlemen, please. Then prepare dinner. Don't forget to get the house ready for the storm."

The girl, who had just now emerged from the shadows next to the door she had closed when they entered, and from which she hadn't moved, went directly to a door at the back. Some cats followed her, secure in the hope of receiving leftovers from the kitchen, others lingered around the armchairs, bobbing up and down. The woman stroked one on her lap.

"I ran your bath, Máximo," she said to her husband. "There's hot water. Go and rest."

That change in voice and tone was typical of a resentful woman, ashamed of her resentment, ready to seize any opportunity to be kind, to show that she isn't and doesn't feel the way everyone thinks she is and feels, the way she herself knows she really is: resentful, cruel, and merciless. Then she looked at Maximiliano, letting her husband walk away with his things, toward the door through which she had appeared, which undoubtedly led to the bedrooms.

"Where do you intend to settle your mission, brother?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am..."

"Please, call me Natacha."

"Thank you... Señora Natacha..." She smiled at his awkwardness, and he celebrated her relaxation in the conversation. "Forgive me, in my country and in my house, my uncle José's severity accustomed me to certain traditions..."

"And I celebrate it, my dear brother, I assure you. In these parts, I feel like an almond tree uprooted from my land and planted in the middle of the jungle. My husband is a caring, cultured man, from the Hurtado de Mendoza family, but when he returns from his travels, I have to force him to leave all the bad habits of his profession at the doorstep. It's becoming more difficult for me, and I'm getting older and more tired. I no longer even have the comfort of my son, except when he comes to visit me."

María arrived with the silver service. She placed the tray on a table, next to a porcelain fruit bowl as a centerpiece, on a lace tablecloth.

"This service is the remains of a samovar my parents brought from Warsaw." What hasn't been lost was stolen. I regret not offering you what you undoubtedly deserve. Your accent, my lord, your presence—and she said this to Don Roberto—flatter me greatly. They take me back to times gone by, when I was young, when I was in love, and my son was small. If you had seen the image of my husband when he was young, his figure silhouetted against the horizon of any sunset on these plains, or by the river. When he returned from his travels, strong and slender, with his short blond beard, his skin sunburned.

A silence was broken by the meowing of cats from the kitchen.

"I see you like animals very much," said Don Roberto.

"That's right, my dear sir, they're wonderful company. So intuitive, too, and so intelligent. My son adored them, and that's why they know when he's about to arrive."

Don Roberto didn't answer; Maximiliano stared, perplexed, at the woman. She was obviously crazy, and he decided not to contradict her. She was like a child living in a bygone world, and her husband did nothing but keep up

appearances. If not, she would immediately collapse, and he couldn't tolerate that; guilt and remorse prevented him from doing so.

But Don Roberto then asked:

"Please excuse my clumsiness, dear madam. I am nothing more than a peasant, a mountain man, a cattle breeder. But I would like to know if you see your son often, if his eyes... how can I explain this... if you see something in his eyes that you didn't see before?" He said all this, interrupting himself, trying to find the right and sufficiently polite words, moving his hands as if catching those words in the air, like delicate flies created by his mind.

The woman smiled and placed her hands on the old man's.

"You have expressed it beautifully, my dear sir. What you say is true. I see something very beautiful in his eyes, the same thing I see right now in one of yours." "And what is it?" Maximiliano's voice intervened like an unwanted blow in the conversation. For the first time, she looked at him with open contempt. Ignoring him with her gaze, but answering the question, she said: "He's like God, isn't he, my sweet Don Roberto?" And she looked again at Maximiliano, still holding her hand. ey, as if clinging to a figure of salvation.

Maximiliano knew she knew everything. That same night, near dawn, the knowledge would be too vast, but he already felt he shouldn't have accepted the captain's invitation or ever entered that house.

21

Maximiliano went to her room after he and Don Roberto had been served a hearty dinner prepared by women. It reminded him of the days at Uncle José's house, when they would make him soup, cakes, and whatever else he wanted, the plates always hot, the table set, and they would be at his sides, awaiting his whims, eager to please them, and disappointed when the slightest thing, the slightest thing, would upset him: the slightly cold tea, the soup too hot, or whatever he thought of inventing to upset them. He enjoyed the dominance he exercised over them when his uncle was away. Weeks, sometimes months, where he was the master of the house, without needing to take on obligations. Of course, this was when he was a child; later, he became withdrawn and sad, in the opinion of the old maids who had watched him grow up. As he walked down the hall behind María, he thought of them. Everything that had happened in the last few days in Cádiz seemed strange to him, too distant, as if he were someone else to whom such things had happened, because in reality, he didn't feel any pain, only longing. Not even nostalgia, which wouldn't involve any kind of remorse, if that was what he expected to feel or find in some recess of his soul. María was very beautiful, and he only just noticed it. She had the lamp in front of her, illuminating the hall. He saw the outlines of her dress silhouetted against that light. He saw the way she walked, the profile of her

face when she turned her head slightly to answer something he asked, the shape of her jaw, the hair falling over her shoulders, her arms raised, one holding the lamp, the other some towels and clean sheets. Her shoulders were strong, in keeping with the silhouette of her breasts, evident beneath the dress that was neither too tight nor too loose. He didn't consider whether she was blonde or dark-skinned; the most likely thing he would discover in the daylight the next day was that her hair was jet-black and her skin light, perhaps pale. From what he heard in her tone, she wasn't a foreigner, but she wasn't indigenous either. She must have been nineteen or twenty, but she seemed to be getting along very well in the house and enjoyed the confidence of the captain's wife, who couldn't have been a condescending employer. Don Roberto followed him, his fist clutching the back of Maximiliano's jacket. They were like followers of an exquisite light carried by a Vestal Virgin through the dark corridors of death. For a moment, he felt the echo of their footsteps, as if the corridor were eternal and very high, instead of just the hallway of an ordinary house that, in the middle of the night, assumed the pretensions of a gloomy and haunted mansion.

They reached the door of the room they had been assigned. Maria opened it, and a damp, closed-in air reached their nostrils. She gave a slight, apologetic laugh, a sound like worn gold in the damp. She opened the windows, and the strong wind, the scent of wet grass, entered, flooded the room and escaped through the door, seeking the ancient and gloomy corridor. The three of them breathed a sigh of relief, for beads of sweat had already begun to fall from Maximilian's forehead. Was it the dampness or something else, he wondered.

They sat down to wait for her to make the beds. He watched her move from side to side, preparing the room, pausing here and there for a few seconds, checking to see if there were any creases in the sheets, taking blankets out of the closet. She paused with her arms crossed and her brow slightly furrowed, taking a general look around the room.

Yes, Maximiliano told himself, she was beautiful, so much so that he couldn't tear his eyes away when theirs met, and a blush crossed Maria's face. Then, on that same face obscured by the shadows of the night, he thought he saw a smile, her teeth peeking out, complicit and flirtatious, from behind lips that seemed moist and warm to him. And then he knew he had to do something, that the previous night hadn't allowed the seeds in his body to fertilize. That desire always reawakened no matter how much it lulled itself at times. Carnal desire was invariably obsessive, irremediably constant, until it was satisfied. He knew that beneath his clothes, his skin was sweating and his heart was racing, that his genitals were tingling and his eyes ached from desire. His mouth was secreting saliva that he was forced to swallow. His hands were trembling slightly, as if he were starving. He wiped his forehead with his sleeves, stood up and faced the window, inhaling the cool breeze from the storm that had yet to break. She was worried, but she would be back very soon.

"If you need anything, please knock. I'll stay in the kitchen for another hour," she said, stepping back toward the bedroom door.

"Thank you very much," Don Roberto replied. "But we don't want to bother you any longer."

"That's true, María, everything's very well. We appreciate your kindness."

She smiled. Her teeth flashed a little again.

"I don't usually go to sleep until very late; I suffer from insomnia, so it's no bother."

"I'm sorry to hear that, and how do you manage to work during the day?"

"I take a few siestas. There's not much to do around here, except when the lady feels ill."

"I understand," said Maximiliano, who also smiled. "Because of her son, I suppose."

"Yes, sir, sometimes... she has attacks... dreams... and we have to take care of her."

The door was still open, and a shadow approached the frame. The young woman hadn't seen her, but Maximiliano saw Natacha, serious, assuming she had heard everything.

"Thank you, María, it's very kind of you to inform our guests about the goings-on in this house."

María left almost running, her head bowed.

"I'm sorry, madam... Natacha. It was my fault and my indiscretion. It was a terrible mistake on my part."

"That's obvious. Your father, here present, would never have made that mistake in his entire life. Now tell me, my dear Don Roberto, are you comfortable?"

She ignored Maximiliano for the rest of the time she was in the room. She had the old man sit on a small sofa a few feet from the bed, and she sat down next to him. He heard her ask something almost in Don Roberto's ear. He thought he saw her looking at him out of the corner of her eye while she spoke to the old man, as if she were murmuring and speaking ill of him. That infuriated him, because he didn't think it was any more polite than the indiscretion he'd committed a little while earlier. In any case, he couldn't blame the woman for anything. He was, moreover, a guest in the house, and owed it above all to the captain. He, too, was a victim of his wife's bitterness. After his bath, he had sat at the table only for a moment to apologize and go to sleep.

Then she kissed Don Roberto's hands and stood up, ready to leave. She deigned to cast a bewildered glance at Maximiliano and say, apparently without addressing him:

"I hope you enjoy a good night, and that you like the room. It's the best in my house. My son slept here when he lived with us."

He went to a chest of drawers where Maria had placed a porcelain basin. He opened the top drawer and took out a portrait. He placed it on the table and looked at it.

"This is my son Ariel."

Maximiliano thought he mistook the name for a fleeting moment, thought he heard Aurelio.

"Beautiful name," was all he managed to say.

She nodded in silence, went to the door, and took one last look, as if memorizing the state of things to corroborate them the next day.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night," both men responded almost simultaneously, but she had already closed the door.

She helped the old man undress and go to bed. He undressed in the darkness, enjoying the fresh air from the window.

"It's going to get wet when it rains," Don Roberto said in the darkness.

"What does that matter? I'm not afraid of that witch."

The old man didn't respond. He saw him remain still, his gaze fixed on the ceiling, and enter that uncertain zone that was neither sleep nor wakefulness, and to which he had grown accustomed, to the point that it didn't bother him, because he had decided how to consider it asleep. He felt that he was happy and excited, that the electricity from the storm had transmitted an energy that led him to disregard rules and customs. He slept naked for the first time in a long time, without shame, without worrying about what the others in the same room would say. He looked at his own body in the shadows, ran his hands through his body hair, and wondered why he didn't do what he wanted, what he needed to do. Outside, the storm sent flashes of lightning illuminating the room, and his body shone white, and he saw himself different. He was no longer a boy, he was a man. He got up, put on only his pants, and left the room. Inside, the old man remained asleep, and the window was open. Inside, fear, good manners, and appearances remained. Inside, guilt and remorse remained, the eyes of God watching him and forcing him to be an observer, a warden in God's cruel institution. The demons he feared and needed to fight, the demons who had defeated God and seized his bones, building hellish palaces with them at the bottom of the ocean.

The water and rain that formed seas now had a different connotation. The wetness of women vindicated the bad reputation he had given the seas. If the moon, dry, filled with stones, and bones, could have such an influence on the tides, it was no wonder that water was actually the dominant force on sterile, dry surfaces.

The male is a dry surface, stone dust. The female seduces him, dissolves him, dilutes him first into streams, then into rivers, and finally into seas.

Behind him, in the room, were locked away grief and responsibility, guilt before God and Uncle José. The hidden pain and the mouth-covered cry. Up ahead, in the hallway of that strange house, were his arms and legs, his strong hands filled with desire. For once in his life, for the first time, perhaps, he was no longer fighting a battle with himself.

Permission had finally come to him. Thanks to that night's storm, which he now felt finally bearing down on the nearby river and the plain. Crushing the grass, subduing the roof of the house with a deafening noise, accelerating the heartbeat of his yearning body, he headed straight for the room where he knew Maria was. Waiting for him, otherwise what other meaning could those open-lipped smiles, those comments about insomnia have, other than to indicate that she, too, had been missing a man for a long time.

He arrived and knocked, fearing that anyone else in the house would hear him. Maria opened the door. In the darkness of the room, only a very weak candle revealed one side of the narrow bed, with a sheet hanging off it. A woman's scent invaded Maximiliano's nose. Maria closed the door, approached him from behind, caressing his back. He let her, feeling the shape of her hands on his bare back, then on his chest. He turned, picked her up, and carried her to the bed. He could only see one side of her face, but with his body he could reveal Maria's breasts, ribs, buttocks, thighs, until his lips touched what he had unknowingly longed for.

The rain seemed to destroy the roof, pounding on doors, battering the walls of the house. He imagined the river overflowing until it reached the gallery, and the sensation of flooding satisfied him.

It was then that Maria's bedroom door opened. It could have been the wind blowing through the halls, but framed by the frame was the figure of Mrs. Natacha, like a painting depicting a demon fresh from the ocean.

"So here he is, brother of God, pious priest of Satan. Seducing my servant while his father is dying in my son's room."

Maximiliano had gotten up to cover himself with the sheets. While she was speaking, he put on his pants and ran to the door. She got in the way.

"What happened to Don Roberto?" he asked. She looked at him with sarcasm at first, then said:

"Don't worry, my son arrived just in time to rescue him."

Maximiliano ran into the room, knowing the woman was following him. In the room, Don Roberto was sitting on the bed, soaked, dripping with water, trying to get his wet clothes off while coughing. He approached and shook him by the shoulders, knowing he was just making one mistake after another, that the old man wasn't to blame, that he should calm down. And yet he needed to unload on the things and beings who had interrupted that act of which he knew he was guilty and which he had enjoyed like no other in his entire life.

"What were you doing, old man? How did you think of going to the window in this rain?"

"It's absurd," he said to himself, while wishing to silence Natacha's sarcastic laughter behind him. He knew she rejoiced in seeing him out of control, furious, showing himself as he truly should be. Because that was what she had seen when she had first seen and greeted him the day before.

Or perhaps someone else had told her.

Perhaps it had been that presence she now saw in Don Roberto's left eye, which had lost its opacity and become as clear as the stage of a well-lit theater. Where the light and shadows were just right and just right to show the actions of a drama so ancient, one that God himself had written, and continued to be performed before empty audiences.

In the pupil of his left eye was Ariel. Blond and handsome, athletic and strong like a fifteen-year-old boy raised in the countryside.

"You're seeing him, aren't you?" she heard Natacha ask. "He's come to commiserate with his father, if that's really his father."

Ariel looked him in the eyes and had faced him, standing before him. The left eye was undoubtedly a stage in a grand theater, and Maximiliano was amazed at how much the capacity that had been born in Don Roberto's head had grown in clarity.

Then Ariel began to babble, soundlessly, only moving his lips.

"He wants to speak, but he can't; he can't find the words to describe it," Natacha said. "Define what?!"

"The kind of demon you are, to give you your place in the circles of the sea."

Now he knew.

Don Roberto, soaked, as if he had just emerged from the ocean, had seen the infernal cities built with the ancient bones of God. He knew the areas inhabited by the different kinds of demons, the rooms glimpsed through the windows, the things and customs of those beings, as if they were taciturn families sitting around poor tables.

Ariel.

Jesus.

It was he who stood before Maximilian now.

And since he couldn't unleash his fury on the old man, not because he was one, but because he was the father of the woman he truly loved; and since guilt was both absolute knowledge and absolute despair, he turned to look at Natacha.

He saw her standing, erect like a proud vestal, and younger and more beautiful than she had looked the previous afternoon. For that reason, for such beauty, he could have stopped, but he clearly knew that beauty is more often cruel than kind, and the triumphant smile on Natacha's face never fully formed. Her last wish, which was to say one more hurtful

phrase to the man who had come to break the disastrous monotony of her life, was not granted. As if that man were the end and a miracle.

A blow from his right hand, simply a slap, but so strong that it made her fall to the floor and bleed against the corner of that dresser where her son's portrait was.

When she raised her gaze toward the door, she saw the captain, nervously searching for something in another drawer of that same dresser, half-dressed. His hands were shaking in a way they hadn't been when he'd aimed at the jaguar. He looked at Maximiliano, as if watching him, as if he felt watched, as if the young man's strength were surpassing his acknowledged old age, his weakening, as if he were ashamed to be seen almost naked, just as he had seen him dominated by his wife's temper.

It took him a long time to find the revolver, as if to give Maximiliano time to react. Then he saw him pick up the old and exhausted Don Roberto in his arms and run out the door and out of the house.

Maximiliano heard two shots in the darkness, saw the light of two flashes briefly illuminate him. But it was too late for anything other than the path ahead: clandestinity and the jungle.

22

They walked in the rain for the rest of the night. They knew they had to get as far away from the city as possible. He wasn't sure the captain would turn to the police to look for him—he had seen something in the old man's hesitant determination to arrest him—and he wasn't really sure his wife was dead either. It was something he assumed when he saw the blood, and something he assumed as soon as he looked up at the captain. But whatever happened, they had to flee.

They hadn't spoken since they left the house. First, Maximiliano carried Don Roberto in his arms. Both were barefoot, he wearing only his pants and the old man his soaked nightgown. He carried him for two or three kilometers, walking very quickly, since he had given up running, slipping in the mud several times, getting up to walk again more slowly, with the rain in his face, in complete darkness as the city lights disappeared and first the fields and then the trees began to take over the path.

It was a labyrinth he traversed blindly, on slippery and treacherous ground. When he realized Don Roberto was speaking to him—he was so absorbed, so exhausted that he hadn't heard him—he decided to stop and rest. He placed the old man on the ground, trying to keep his head off the mud, but there wasn't a single dry or covered spot. Don Roberto showed no sign of wanting to sit down, so he let his head fall to the ground and closed his eyes. The rain fell on his face and made it difficult for him to breathe. Maximiliano sat down beside him and tried to protect him with his hands.

"Calm down," he said in an unintelligible murmur, while trying to clear his face of water and mud.

They couldn't stay there much longer. Soon he would see the headlights of those who would pursue them, but perhaps they would wait until it had cleared up or dawned. This relieved him a little, and he decided to rest as well. There was no way to lie down without exposing the old man to the rain again, which showed no signs of letting up. He imagined how an outside witness would see them in that ridiculous position. Suddenly, he fell asleep, he didn't know for how long. When he woke up, the rain had stopped. He forced himself to stay awake, got up, and spoke to the old man. The other man nodded in agreement. He helped him up, and from then on, leaning on Maximilian, he walked. He didn't know where he was going; he just followed what seemed to be a straight line from the door of the house toward the street. section he believed the river was in. But they were most likely going in circles, and besides, the car ride through the city had surely confused him. His plan, if he had one, was to reach the shore and find a boat in which they could hide and flee far from the area. Around the city of Paraná, there were nothing but poor settlements, which would be the first place the authorities would look when searching for them.

When it began to get light, he saw the silhouettes of the enormous trees that rose all around, still dark green, mixed with the fog, covered in dew. The branches fell heavily, wide as canoes, subjecting everything to their incredible weight and density. The rain seemed to have opened up empty spaces that in a few hours had been filled with new bushes and leaves. The birdsong could be heard from everywhere, from the tops of the tall trees, from the bushes, and from the ground below. They walked barefoot through the dry foliage, hurting themselves on the branches and thorns.

If this was the beginning of the jungle, still so close to the city, Maximiliano wondered, what would it be like to be immersed in the real thing? He didn't want to even imagine it, and yet he had promised himself to do it. And now that they were there, almost naked and helpless, thanks to his own ineptitude, there was no way to back out. He was responsible for Don Roberto to Elsa. He had to return to Buenos Aires with his father healed, or at least alive if they couldn't find a way to cure him. But finding himself in the middle of the night, making his way through the plants and branches that hurt them, he felt disconsolate. He glanced sideways at the old man from time to time, and once the old man looked back at him. The old man's eyes had softened their differences, at least because of the morning. Both seemed grayish and transparent, and it seemed that both could see. There was no reproach in that look, not even a need or desperation to understand what had happened the night before. It was what he had expected, and yet there was none of that. Don Roberto's gaze was like Elsa's, and Maximiliano was amazed that he hadn't discovered it sooner. He saw the love in those eyes, like the time he woke up on the ship and mistook Elsa's face for that of the Virgin Mary. He saw himself crossing the ocean again, the way those two had accepted him, one caressing him like a child, the other patting him like a son.

Then Don Roberto, without stopping walking, raised his left hand, since he was holding Maximiliano's arm with his right, and slowly brought it until it touched the silver cross. Maximiliano no longer realized he was still carrying it. It was very light, and he only noticed it sometimes when he slept. If the old man's gesture was intended to encourage him, to tell him that they should place their hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, it was too obtuse, too insincere. The old man's hand, dirty, bony, and bruised, was more a symbol of suffering than the cross itself, with its elegance, its baroque reliefs, and the exquisite shine that survived the blows and grime.

But it was enough for him to understand that the old man, in one way or another, understood everything, and perhaps even knew everything: both anger and pity, both resentment and forgiveness, both madness and beatitude. From the tops of the trees, rays of light pierced the foliage, drying his damp skin and dirty hair. The mud slowly flaked away, like husks left behind on the road, revealing two bodies whiter than they had been during the entire journey across the sea and the river. The mud had dirtied them and washed them clean at the same time. Yet the mud had left its scent on their skin, the scent of plant excrements, of animal secretions and dung, of the carcasses that died there daily.

Perhaps the jungle had chosen them, accepted them, and so had begun to mark them in the only way it knew how: with the scent that never fades.

One day, one of the following afternoons, after the sun had risen and set two or three times, or perhaps more, neither of them having any notion of time, they arrived at the banks of the wide river. They had eaten food left by the villagers at the foot of many trees, the carcasses of marmots or dogs. Maximilian found two large skins that smelled of sweet ferments, which they wrapped themselves in at night. While insulating them from the cold and dampness of the night, it protected them from the sight and smell of many animals whose eyes they saw shining among the foliage, following and stalking them. He had deliberately avoided populated areas. When the bustle of people was barely perceptible, or at night the lights of a town were visible, they would both change direction, and they had done so many times. Or who had already resigned themselves to having lost their way forever. Dying there was better than being caught and imprisoned. They wouldn't even be deported to Spain, but, most likely, condemned to the miserable prisons of that province.

Don Roberto seemed to have decided to share the same fate with him. He expressed it with his way of speaking, with his gaze, sometimes lost, sometimes lucid as a morning star, bright as a star so distant that perhaps it was already dead, and only its faint glow reached Maximilian. The old man touched the silver cross many times a day, and Maximilian offered to give it to him, but he refused. He preferred to see it on someone else's chest, as a guide, a support, or a consolation.

"My head hurts too much now, as if I were carrying lead bags, or if I'd been shot in the eyes." Sometimes it seems like I don't have them and I see with my brain; other times I have the sensation that my eyes are bulging out,

and I see as if I were looking through a telescope. Then I see so many strange things, the small, immense, the enormous, like tiny ants, and I realize that they are actually the numerous parts that make up those things.

Maximilian had never heard him speak like that. Not so much, nor in such detail. His language seemed to have been enriched by the silence and darkness in which he had been immersed recently.

The afternoon they reached the shore, the sun would be setting in about two hours, no more. The thick foliage hid it, the tall trees that piled up on top of each other, stretching out twisted in their eagerness to get closer to the shore, to the damp bank where there would be more food and space. That's why the foliage hung and fell into the river, being tossed and sometimes dislodged by the more or less strong current. The few clear spaces were those opened by the natives for fishing, washing clothes, and lowering canoes. But today there was no one, and they sat in a clearing no more than two meters wide. They watched the waters flow, wondering what they would do. The opposite shore, perhaps two kilometers away, of deep, torrential water, was exactly the same. Pure green trees, in an even more impenetrable tangle. Maximiliano held Don Roberto at his side, almost rocking him, speaking to him of forgiveness.

They had never discussed what had happened at the captain's house. He believed he was closer to his heart than before, and his love for Elsa had grown with his love for the old man. What he had seen a few nights before in his eyes, the hatred and anger, was something he had to exorcise, like someone pulling out the roots of a bad, poisonous plant from the spring garden of his house. They were roots extending from or toward him, Maximiliano, because he felt them entangling the organs in his chest, even surrounding his bones. For some time, he had been so desperate to escape from himself that he wasn't sure where he was going, because the jungle was the very heart of the tangle.

When there was almost nothing left but a halo, a vein of light dying in the air, some bright lights appeared on the very bank upriver, in a bend in the river.

"There's a port further on; they're barge lights." He stood up and hung from some strong branches to peer over the river, because without the bend he was making, he wouldn't have discovered it. He planned to get there and hide on a boat, continue upriver until he reached where Valverde had indicated. Where he must find the indigenous people who healed. Now he was no longer just Don Roberto's eye, but also the salvation of his own soul. He knew there was no way to separate body and soul. They were a tangle like the impenetrable forest in which they were submerged.

The death of one was the death of the other. If not even God had survived his own bones, how could he expect his heart to shed the growing roots that nourished it? And those roots didn't even serve as a means of communication between living beings—we were all isolated, souls permanently and unfailingly isolated—they were only means of nourishment, of dependence, of slavery.

That same night, perhaps an hour before dawn—he had already learned to recognize the halo of light filtering very cautiously through the foliage. It was strange that it hadn't yet dawned and a patina of light could already be seen on the leaves. Perhaps the foliage radiated that reflection, or perhaps it was simply an illusion—he got Don Roberto to stand up, and the two of them walked slowly through the narrow spaces between the plants, as close to the shore as they could. A short while later, they had reached the small harbor where they saw the ship anchored. It had almost cleared up, but the sun was only a hint, a promise that threatened to be broken at the peak of the day.

It was a short dock, jutting into the river like an old water hyacinth, because it had a circular shape after a narrow passage that connected it to the shore. Green moss on the pillars, the color of chipped, splintered, and sunken wood everywhere else. From their hiding place, behind an abandoned shack that must have been an old, no-longer-used latrine, they heard the creaking of wood under the footsteps of men carrying things to the boat. It was older but larger than the one they had traveled to Paraná on, its metal hull covered in algae and rust. It was a calm morning, so it barely rocked, a slight, imperceptible sway.

They should have arrived earlier, Maximiliano told himself. It was too light to sneak into the interior of the boat without being seen. So they armed themselves with patience. With each passing hour, he feared the boat would set sail and they would be stranded there, who knew for how long. After noon, the men began to disappear into a dwelling that appeared to be the dining room and sleeping quarters for the port workers. Then he knew it was the right time. He helped the old man walk toward the dock. He tried to stay away from the house, but he could hear the raised voices and some very loud laughter of the men who were having lunch. There were dogs too, but they were inside, around the table, waiting for the leftovers. No doubt some would come out upon hearing them, but the men would ignore them. The sound of the current was very loud, and the ship's machinery was also intense.

They reached the dock and walked along it until they reached the ship's side. Several barking noises were heard. Maximilian looked back, but the dogs were still inside the house. Was he sure the ship had been emptied? That no one, not even an old man, was guarding the engine room, or sleeping off his drunken night, about to be awakened by hunger and the smell of roasting meat wafting from the house? He couldn't be sure of anything, but it was too late to back out. Before and during those hours, he had invented excuses to give if they were found, he had even thought about the best way to beg for mercy and pity, feigning helplessness and indigence. And suddenly he found himself laughing at himself, because that was what they really were: two ragged beings wandering hungry and aimless in an unknown place. He wouldn't need to say anything to justify himself, just hope they would let them board and offer them food or throw them ashore again, treated worse than those dogs, who would undoubtedly be fed and sheltered.

But they found no one. They climbed the ladder, feeling the vibration of the engines warming their bare feet like a tickle. They looked for the first hatch that would take them below deck. Don Roberto had a hard time finding his way foot by foot on the short steps, and Maximiliano kept looking around to see if anyone appeared. The sun was setting behind heavy black clouds. Finally, they went downstairs and searched the hallways for a place to hide. They went down to another level, where they found a large warehouse of merchandise. Against one wall were bags of potatoes, flour, and corn. On the other, there were crates of cans containing all kinds of food. Behind them, the smell of rats. On the last wall, opposite the entrance, were more crates of bottles: wine, liquor, gin, whiskey. In the middle of all this, ropes, boards, rags, and dirty mattresses.

And no light, because when he closed the front door, there was only darkness. Little by little, his eyes adjusted, and asking the old man to stay seated and listen for anyone coming down, since his hearing had become more sensitive, he began to search for anything they might need among all those things. He chose a mattress, the only one that didn't seem to have insects or smell too bad, wrapped it in leather cloth, and placed it behind the crates of cans. He assumed the first thing the crew would use was the perishable food, and undoubtedly the bottles of alcohol, so with a lot of luck they could spend a few days there, until the next port.

When he finished, he saw the old man shivering. It was indeed cold down there, but mostly because of the accumulated humidity. The old man's bones would begin to creak like old chains, and even his own would do so very soon. But there was no way, nor could they even consider lighting a fire to warm themselves. The two of them lay down on the mattress, well hidden behind the crates. Maximilian got up, watched with the light from the slightly open door, and checked the effectiveness of his hiding place. He agreed, but then he wondered if all that merchandise was for delivery or for use on the voyages. He shook off his doubts; there was nothing he could do to change the situation. They would wait a few days, and he would try to pray. Who, he wondered, would God not bring down to that cave, besides he was already dead, as he had been able to see in the eyes. In the eyes of Brother Aurelio, in the eyes of Uncle José, in the eyes of Don Roberto. He would sit with the old man, and, joining hands on the silver cross, they would offer a prayer, exactly as pagans would. The cross, after all, before Jesus was nothing more than an instrument of punishment, another form of death sentence. Then, it represented nothing more than an amulet, no different from a clay doll molded by the hands of a witch doctor, or a pile of knots tied around the neck, or a puma's claw in the pocket, or a blessed lock of hair from a dead person. Things to cling to, to which to entrust despair to make it more attainable. Things like that ship that hid them in its infected intestines, that hold into which, with luck, no one would descend to discover them. But then he wondered how they would endure, and how long, and how they would get out. These questions gained ground throughout the hours of that day, when no one went down to get provisions. They heard the anchor being raised, and the ship began to move with a creaking of timbers, as if it were scraping against the dock. They heard shouts and laughter, and imagined what must be happening:

the shouts and insults of the attendant, the cackling of the crew. Then the serenity gave way to a clang of metal, chains, and the rushing waves that were stronger down there. From somewhere, through some crack, cooler air was seeping in, which was a blessing. Both were extremely dirty. The old man's body, now stripped of his nightgown, was a scraggly fragment of humanity lying on the mattress. He found a cloth as clean as possible and opened a bottle of brandy to clean the old man. Don Roberto stirred, feeling the burning of the alcohol on his wounds, but didn't make a sound of complaint. As he did so, he wondered what they were drinking; it was impossible for them to survive on such beverages; they needed some water. He gave the old man something to drink, hoping he'd sleep for a few hours. Then he took off his ragged trousers and began to clean himself as well. The smell of the brandy calmed him somewhat, especially the freshness of the alcohol on his skin, even on the wounds, which in any case needed to be cleaned with something strong. He set the bottle aside, lay down, and soon entered a deep, lucid sleep, where the bottles were tipped over him like a balsamic bath, fresh and renewing. He no longer felt pain or burning, only an enormous fatigue that sank him into the deep waters of the river of death. The Styx was more serene than he had imagined; there was no fire on the banks, but there had once been, and only desolation remained, a permanent twilight, silence without pain, peace without consolation. But the banks receded, at the same pace as the current, and he traveled upstream. Without raising his head, he saw that God was waiting for him, patient, sitting like a peddler, or like a hunter waiting for his hounds to arrive. So patient that death was even more bearable than God's infinite, merciless patience.

He woke with a start: a bang on the cellar door. He opened his eyes, and the light suddenly disappeared. Someone had come and gone. How long had they been inside? Had they been discovered? Probably someone who had come to get a bottle and left very quickly. He had no way of knowing what time of day it was. He had fallen asleep and lost track of time. It could already be night, or perhaps the next day. He got up to see if he heard anything, sounds of movement that would indicate the probable time of day. He heard the usual loud voices, men shouting to each other even when they were standing right next to each other. Obscenities and insults took on new meanings because they were applied to every purpose. He couldn't understand what they were saying anyway, so he gave up. It was daytime, probably dinnertime. The engines were idling, and they cruised in near silence. Don Roberto had woken up and was calling him in a low voice.

"I'm here, Father. Are you cold?"

"Just a little."

Maximiliano covered him with a burlap sack. Then he looked for something to eat. He decided on some raw potatoes and a couple of cans of preserved chickpeas. It wasn't difficult to open them; there were all kinds of tools down there. They both felt satisfied for the first time in so many days. The old man gagged, but managed to contain himself. Maximiliano stroked his

back, urging him to keep the food inside. He was thin and feared he'd die before reaching his destination, which he wasn't sure where it really was, but Roberto restrained himself and continued eating from the can. The juice was delicious for their starved bodies, and the potatoes were like the bread they had with it. They were thirsty, so he turned to a wine that seemed bland, judging by the label.

"It must be from the exclusive wine cellar." "Captain," Maximiliano joked. "All we need to do is sit at your table."

Don Roberto laughed, a short, low laugh, but it was the first in a long time. Then he said he needed to urinate, so Maximiliano, knowing that this would be another problem for both of them if they remained down there for too long, led him to one of the already soiled mattresses, where the old smell would mask the new ones. Afterward, he had him lie down, and he waited for the sounds from above. He stood by the door, trying to hear any noise indicative of anything: the footsteps of the guard on deck, the sounds of the water, the chirping of some birds. Then, when he opened the door just a crack, he heard the chirping of crickets. He knew it was nighttime, and since he had heard voices not long before, he decided to stay awake until he was sure everyone was asleep. There would surely be a guard there to monitor the course, but perhaps he could throw him off and get some water. A while later, he opened the door and climbed the ladder. He poked his head out and saw no one. It was late at night, calm, and hot. The crickets were chirping loudly, and the only other sound was the faint sound of the waves hitting the hull. He had seen some barrels in the ship's mess hall, so he went there, passing under the window where the helmsman must have been. He felt his bare feet on the wood, covered by a pair of underpants improvised from the old fabric of his torn trousers. He reached the mess hall and went straight to the barrels. How did he carry the water, he wondered. He saw dirty glasses, pitchers, and serving dishes on the table, but it was impossible to reach below with that. He found wine bottles, emptied the rest, and filled them with water. He loaded as many as he thought he could carry without risking dropping them, and returned to the hatches. He left the bottles, went down, picked them up again, and closed them. He was happy to have gotten water. He woke Don Roberto and gave him a drink. The old man looked at him happily, but he knew it wouldn't last long. Even if he used the same bottles to fill them over and over again, there was a greater risk of being caught stealing one night.

At least that night and the next day they would have water, if they took good care of it, and they wouldn't have to worry about food. Only time and human curiosity, even chance and bad luck. Chance, Maximilian told himself. But the old man touched the silver cross and closed his eyes. There are no chances, Maximilian thought as he tried to fall asleep, only events to which their lives would lead them.

They spent ten days in the ship's hold. Maybe eleven, maybe twelve. There were days when he wasn't sure if he had slept more than he should have, or if his vigil, which he considered to be the length of the day, actually

included the night as well. The more time passed, the more lost they felt in time. That hold was like the ship of Acheron, and they traveled without time, stubbornly clinging to the mortal measures of the old life.

When the door closed, the darkness dissolved into a gloom to which their eyes were so accustomed that, by the end of that period, they had become like true daylight. So it wasn't difficult for their hours to transform into days, and these into long journeys where consciousness flowed or fell asleep with great ease. There were no longer exalted periods, no despair, not even conversations. Each one would get up from their hiding place, walk a few steps, and lie down again in silence. It was neither cold nor hot, and they were no longer afraid of being discovered. The few times the crew members came down, it was for a few minutes, just enough to look for a bottle or a bag of flour.

Sometimes a burly man, bare-chested and wearing a white cap, would come down. He must have been the cook. He was the only one who spent almost five minutes searching for something, but ultimately didn't find it. They both remained hidden, breathing very softly and quietly. They heard him mutter insults to himself; he must be protesting the filthy state of the hold, because the smell of fecal matter and urine was indeed intense. The mattresses covered in filth couldn't be in the same place as the kitchen supplies. That was what they heard clearly as he closed the door. The words were directed toward someone at the other end of the ladder, or the hallway. Then Maximilian knew they wouldn't have any more time. They would soon come to clean the place up.

Every time the engines stopped and the ship's swaying signaled a halt, the noises up above never ceased, and they had no chance to see if they could get out unseen. He had hoped for a port stop during the night, but that opportunity hadn't yet arrived. Thinking about that, he fell asleep. And waking up was like a passage to another life. Too much light that brought pain to the eyes. He only knew for sure what was happening to them because he could clearly hear the sailors' voices and laughter. He felt kicked in the ribs and face, then lifted and thrown. As he fell, he felt the earth and mud of the beach.

"Throw the old man in too! Go mess things up somewhere else!" a voice shouted. The men laughed and jeered.

He knew Don Roberto was a few feet away from him; he had felt the impact beside him. That blow could have killed him. He tried to get up, but his legs felt numb. He strained with his arms and dragged himself a few inches toward the silhouette he saw just to his left. The light hurt him, and the shadow play of the men's bodies was like a game of chess. He looked back, forcing his eyelids to stay open. The men were returning to the boat. He saw the old man a few feet away from him, face down on the beach, his head twisted and one arm that looked broken. He tried to get up, but suddenly felt a sharp pain in his right leg, and every time he tried to move it, the bones clicked like castanets. He touched his body, knowing he was completely naked, just like Don Roberto. He felt his leg wet, crusted with drying mud. He smelled fresh blood. He turned to look at himself, sitting up

a little. The pain was too intense, but somehow he knew that those days of confinement had numbed his senses and reflexes. The sunlight was a whitish halo on the periphery of his eyes, but in the center, things were taking shape. He saw his leg broken in two and the bones exposed. Every time he moved, the pain was a kind of dull sound reverberating in his nerves. He gave up trying and crawled over to the old man. He shook the old man a little to see if he would wake up. He turned his head to his side to feel his breath. Yes, he seemed to be still breathing. The twisted arm had nothing, apparently, only wounds. He began to pray that he might wake up. He thought of his silver cross, which he still carried with him. He gripped it very tightly, enclosing it in the fist of his left hand, and placed it on Don Roberto's head.

"God," he said in a very low voice, repeating something he had once read, as the ship blew its steam funnel in farewell. "I was given a mouth to speak great things and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months. And it opened its mouth in blasphemies against God. I was given war against the saints and to conquer them, and authority over every tribe, people, and nation."

The ship's horn sounded what he imagined to be the lament of a tired dinosaur drifting away to die in the waters, while the sun seemed to expand into concentric halos of different and unknown colors. The beach was wider, because the river receded with the boat, and the trees grew taller and taller, the jungle drew closer, and from it came the wild beasts, uttering those same words he had spoken.

He shook the old man's body, trying to force the words into his head as if they were an electric force that would revive his weary heart. Then the old man opened his eyes, and they were normal. They no longer had that opaque halo of blindness; they were brown, almost green at times, and Maximilian focused his sight on the center of his left eye. He saw nothing but his own reflection, and it was this that frightened him, what truly made him realize that the one who had spoken those words from the Book of Revelation had been someone else who now inhabited him, or at least finally took control of Maximilian's body. The being that inhabited him, one of many, one for each book of the Old and New Testaments. One who begged, another who humiliated, one who killed, another who blessed. And many more who rebelled. Now it was the turn of that dragon who would take possession of the surrounding world.

He knew then that he would rise, that his dominion was in that place: the jungle and the river, and all the sky and all the earth above and below him. It was as easy to know, as it was so easy, now, to get up with his broken leg and drag it along the beach as if he were a god carrying a pole with which to rule the world.

Sometimes the pain was too great, but the body deceived them, anesthetizing them so that they would ask to move and escape the danger that threatened them. For Maximiliano and Don Roberto, the danger was behind them and before them. Yet it was almost a matter of nuances, of degrees of danger, of the proximity of possible violent events, of misfortune and tragedy. They were made for tragedy, Maximilian told himself through tears, when he finally let himself fall beside the old man's body, after dragging him to the shade of the first enormous trees that looked like monsters with many anguished arms, lamenting for millennia the eternal misery of life. He felt protected by them, in some uncertain way, as if all those months in contact with the sea, the river, and the jungle had brought him into contact with his own true nature: the wild.

And the wild was the divine. If God was deep within, there was no choice but to delve into one's own pain until one found him. God, who slinked like a rodent in its deep burrow dug in the mud, like a spider fleeing to hide and then wander over the sleeping bodies of men.

The two of them were now part of that jungle. The shadow of the afternoon was falling, and his broken leg, with splintered bones protruding in various places from the skin, had fallen asleep as if it no longer belonged to him. And that feeling was a good thing, because his body knew how to act much better than his mind. Even his soul could make mistakes, stray from the paths of good that providence marked out for the contemplation of God and the salvation of the soul. Not so the body, whose sole intention was survival, and to that end it directed all its strength and energy, without fear or moral or ethical doubts from a seminary or aristocratic salon. He believed that civilization is a product of slavery, and fear of the other had created the hierarchies that raise armed walls between men. The body knows, and that is what he realized now, remembering the anatomy books he had read in Uncle José's library, because it was as if he were reading them again in the rugged landscape, dazzlingly serene, brilliant and gloomy at the same time, of the shadow that loomed in that godforsaken place.

God as the ultimate product of civilization, as an idea, as the physiology of knowledge, and knowledge was exposed to the drama of disease, senility, and the deterioration of the nervous system. God, falling into oblivion like a decrepit old man, doesn't recognize his children, and we recognize nothing but his body lying in a boarding house bed, with dirty, threadbare sheets, with the aroma of death represented by the putrid odors of the body, the odors of an old hospital. A hospital without staff, neither doctors nor nurses, with enormous empty wards, with beds isolated or hidden in the shadows, walls from which peeling paint hangs like the skins of antediluvian animals stuffed in a museum older than the history of the world itself. Who came looking for him or who they would have warned he was there, we don't know, and we await his arrival, sitting on a chair found in a corner, stolen from the cobwebs that have kidnapped it from the hands of time, we await the arrival of the men who will come with the large bag on their backs. Perhaps with knives, with axes, with scalpels, with suture threads, with lime powder, to carry away the bones, once and for all, dead.

And so Maximilian waited, at the side of the old man, whom he didn't know was dead or alive, but whom he had carried in the shadows as one carries a child in need of care. He knew he would survive, perhaps without a leg, but stronger than when he had embarked from Cadiz. The shadows of the advancing trees confirmed this, as he heard the owls calling and the wind rustling gently around him through the large palm fronds. Then, the peculiar smell of animals, the smell of exposed flesh, of blood spilled not long before. And he began to murmur:

"My leg, my God, my bones are the trap. My bones, like yours, my God, will fall into the same bottomless sea, to feed the demons." The demons of the jungle, these predators that now surround me, whose eyes I see lurking in the shadow of the night that has finally fallen like an immense moon without light, the moon as stone, simply a tombstone without marks for all of humanity. The grunts and the movement of paws on the gravel. The sound of the river water, its tide slowly rising. The night lives, the night recovers from the dictatorship of the day, the night reclaims time, and a few hours are enough to take everything that interests it, everything that exists.

That's why he believed they were the ones who had lifted him abruptly, the ones with the scent of blood on their skin, like war paint. Without claws, they seemed only fingers. They made sounds similar to human voices. He allowed himself to be lifted and rested between claws that, however, he mistook for human arms as he walked through the narrow jungle paths. He wanted to speak but couldn't. He opened his eyes and only glimpsed the mask painted on a face. He felt his leg dangling at his side, and the voices seemed to comfort him. The swaying of his leg renewed the pain, and he screamed and fainted, remembering nothing of the end of that night. Only waking up without pain, and his leg restored, like a miracle of hostile sarcasm.

The sun woke him in the hut. He opened his eyes, blinded by so much light, but more than the light, he found the warmth pleasing. on his bare, aching skin, covered by a blanket woven from what looked like sheep's wool. He began to feel it and lifted it to cover himself more. He heard laughter around him and looked. There were almost naked Indians, covered in loincloths, some with painted faces and strong bodies, others older, many toothless amidst the smiles that celebrated Maximilian's naive curiosity about the fabric.

One of them knelt at the foot of the cot and spoke to him. He was still young, but he seemed to be the most authoritative of the group. He said something he, of course, didn't understand. How could he possibly understand them, if he had finally arrived at the place he was looking for? He shook his head, implying he didn't understand. He said something to a woman waiting at the entrance of the hut. She came in with a vessel and some rags. She was old, with sagging, bare breasts, and loose white hair. She was strong, though, because she lifted him from the cot and gave him a drink of water. Then, lifting another basin, she moved him from side to side

to clean him. The leg was straight and whole, but held rigid by two boards on either side. The old woman uncovered the leg, covered with bandages made from fresh leaves. Then Maximilian saw the stitches in the skin; the bones were no longer visible, and he felt them in place, his skin reddened, covered with bruises and bloodstains. He wiggled his toes and felt well for the first time in a long time.

The man who had spoken to him came closer again to examine the wounds. He touched them with his fingers, and they didn't hurt. He smiled at her and ordered the old woman to cover them again. The woman did so and finished washing him. He felt touched by the warm water, and he wasn't ashamed to feel naked in front of all those strangers. They didn't laugh, they didn't mock, and they had saved him.

Then everyone left, and the man he knew from then on was the village doctor. The man sat cross-legged on the ground and spoke to him as if he were sure Maximiliano understood him. He understood nothing, only the reason why he did it: the simple need to accompany him, to make him feel at ease, to train him, too, in the sound of his voice and his language. The dark-skinned man, with a strong body and a gentle face, spoke to him more warmly than many civilized whites.

Maximiliano wanted to know about Don Roberto's fate. He asked the question as if he were speaking to a child; he couldn't help it; he knew no other way. He moved his hands, made signs, and uttered words in Spanish as if he were sending a telegram. The man seemed offended; Maximiliano understood why: he had been insulted by his intelligence. However, he also answered with signs, as if mockingly, and understood less than if he had spoken to him in his strange language.

He learned that the old man was alive in the hut next door. He asked to see him, and then he knew that the doctor understood the language. "Do you understand me?" asked Maximilian. "Do you speak Spanish?"

The man laughed and said:

"I understand your words. I read your books, but I don't speak well."

"Books?" Maximilian had many questions to ask; he was astonished, and also frightened.

"Can I see the old man?"

The other replied that he shouldn't get up yet. The old man was fine, but blind, and he was trying to find out the reason.

It was near noon, and a full sun shone through the cracks in the roof and the openings in the door and windows. It was spring, perhaps; he no longer had any notion of time. The time of his arrival in Buenos Aires seemed like many years ago, and in reality, no more than two months had passed, or a little more. But just as his change of location had been so abrupt, so discordant, the distance so enormous, from a civilized city to a jungle, it didn't seem strange to him that time had also been as vast as space suggested. However, they were two entities that did not run parallel, nor did one correspond to the other except on rare occasions that could be

called exceptions to causality. These thoughts led him to his theological studies, and he realized then that he was missing the silver cross.

He felt his chest, searching for it. The indigenous doctor saw him and understood what he was looking for. He signaled that he had it.

"I was afraid I'd lost it," Maximiliano said. "It's a gift from my parents."

The man then stared at him, leaning close almost to the point of feeling his breath on his face. He studied him closely, as if he were an object, an animal he was going to buy. "What is he looking for in my face?"

Maximiliano wondered. "Now he places his hand on my forehead, touches my hair, feels its thickness. I'm not afraid of the danger of dying, but of what he's thinking."

Then the man signaled that he would return. He left, leaving the tarp raised. Maximilian saw the movement of the village after noon. There were half-naked women passing by with pots under their arms or on their heads, children following them, dogs barking and running with them, calves tied to their fences. He saw the tall trees casting intermittent shadows on the paths between the huts. He heard the bustle of people, the sound of water in the pots, the shouts of men returning to eat, perhaps from fishing in the river, from nearby farms, or from the factories of some nearby city. He didn't know where he was, in which province of the country, or at what elevation of the Paraná River. He didn't even know if the river he heard nearby was perhaps a tributary, immersed in the deep interior of the jungle. From what he could glimpse through the door, it was a small, backward village, but very populated and active. Perhaps they were the only inhabitants of an old tribe.

The doctor returned carrying a box. He dropped it next to the cot and opened it. First, he took out the silver cross and handed it to him. The chain was broken, so the doctor told him he'd give him a new one later. Then he took out some tied notebooks, two in total, old and worn. He put them aside because he wanted to show him the silver cross very similar to his own. Maximilian took it in his hands and understood what the other man was trying to convey. Both had come from the same goldsmith. He knew that the Jesuits had built a civilization in that part of the country, had converted the indigenous people into practicing Christians, at least to a certain extent, and then everything had collapsed when the priests were expelled. It had happened two centuries before, or a little less, but the teachings had persisted like some ruins that still stood upright in the middle of the jungle. He had heard and read all this in Spain, and only now did he know that he would soon see him, when his leg was better and he was out of that bed. But for now he had that man's voice, and those writings that he wanted to see right away. However, the doctor still seemed to deny them, because he kept them aside, drawing their attention to the similarity of the crosses.

"Who made this cross?" Maximiliano asked, pointing to the new one.

"The captain," the man replied.

Maximiliano didn't understand, but yes, he immediately told himself, he was beginning to understand the doctor's curiosity on his face.

"What was his name?"

The Indian then lifted the bound notebooks and pointed to a name on the first page. It was deteriorated by humidity and dust. Maximiliano blew on them, afraid of breaking the relic, but the papers weren't that old. He saw a date no more than twenty years old and the name José Menéndez Iribarne.

"Did the captain teach you to read?"

"No, your brother and your wife. They had a school in the village. I went there when I was very young"—he placed his hand on his knee—"it didn't go beyond this, and your wife taught me everything I know." That's why I was able to go to school in the city later, after they left and closed the school.

"Why did they close?"

The man shrugged. He didn't know, he said, or wasn't sure what had happened. He looked at him uneasily, sensing the resemblance.

"Are you his son?" he asked. "He's so similar..."

"I'm the captain's nephew, the couple's son."

He answered as if it were all so normal, and yet he was the one most surprised to discover that his parents had been lay missionaries in those lands before he was born. Why hadn't Uncle José told him about all this? he wondered.

"I want to read these notebooks," Maximilian said.

The other handed them to him.

"Are there any photos?"

The doctor seemed not to understand, but immediately began searching through the box again. He pulled out only one visible photo; the others were washed away. Maximiliano took the photo with a trembling he couldn't contain, and looked at it carefully, as if he were seeing something sacred, something venerated for many years. He had seen photographs in Cádiz of his parents, still single, but they were so primitive that they had almost faded by the time he was able to see them. But in this photograph taken in the middle of the jungle, there were the three of them, the two brothers and the wife of one of them. His mother was between them, and anyone who didn't know better would never have guessed whose wife she was. The brothers were smiling, one arm behind her back and their free hand in the pocket of their jackets. Uncle José, whom he recognized because his face was already clean-shaven, unlike his father's neat beard, had a rifle under his arm. She was very beautiful, dressed in a long skirt that must have been uncomfortable for her in those parts, and an old-looking shirt, yet she looked happy. The brothers' faces were so similar, and Maximilian suddenly wished he had a mirror nearby to look at himself and

compare himself. And as if such a thought were being expressed aloud, the doctor approached him and said:

"I thought he was the son of the captain." Itán, he looks so much like him. I thought I saw him back then when you arrived.

Maximiliano smiled and shook his head.

"Family resemblances, only."

"And who is the man you arrived with?"

"My wife's father."

"The doctor said he would take care of him."

"Where did you learn everything you know about medicine and healing?"

"I went to school in the city, but I learned everything about healing from my people; my ancestors know much more than white men."

Maximiliano laughed, and the other man seemed offended. Then he apologized; he owed him his life and Don Roberto's.

"I want to get up and see the village, for him to show me everything you know."

The man then stood up and laughed with pleasure, patting him on the chest in a friendly manner.

"You'll do it when you're better and can walk. Your leg is badly broken and will take a long time to heal." I have to go see the old man now. We'll see each other tonight, sir...

"Maximiliano," he said.

"My name is Cahrué."

When he was alone, he looked at the photo again. He thought: I'll read the notebooks today. But as he lost himself in the image of the photo, he gradually fell asleep. His eyelids could not bear the weight of sleep, and the fatigue of so much grief and so many days of hunger and suffering descended upon his body, kidnapping him into its sad and meditative realm.

He woke up to Cahrué's voice. It was already night, and a campfire lit the hut. Outside, the call of owls and the intermittent barking of dogs sounded. A woman's voice was protesting, loud and dissonant at first, then cracked, tired, and finally almost dead. Cahrué laughed at her, and Maximiliano asked what was wrong.

"She's the old woman who came this morning to clean him up. She's taking care of the old man who came with you. It seems she cares a lot for him, and she was complaining to the children who are helping her. She's a very good woman..."

"And how is Don Roberto?"

"His wounds are better, but he's still blind. Do you know since when he lost his sight?"

"Since I've known him, no more than two or three months ago, he's never seen his left side. His daughter asked me to bring him to these parts, because they say you know how to cure him."

The Indian sat up straight, proud.

"I didn't know that people talked about us so far away..."

"More like gossip..."

"I understand, but... you know... Mr. Iribarne, we choose who to cure."

"How is that?"

"We believe it's a benefit, something given without expecting anything in return. But that's also the duty of the recipient, to deserve it." If I remember correctly, your father and mother taught us things like that. Different from what the Jesuit priests told us, but Mr. Iribarne had the habit of reading books by the ancient Stoics.

"You surprise me with your knowledge, Cahrué. Are the others in the village like you?"

"No, sir, not at all. I went to school outside this area, I studied medicine. But after a while, I chose what my ancestors taught me. The medicinal rites of my people are superior."

"In what sense?" Maximiliano asked sarcastically.

"In everything you think of, sir."

Maximiliano sat up in bed, and the Indian helped him sit up.

"And what do you think of Don Roberto?"

"Look, Mr. Iribarne. There are spirits in the bodies of men, what you call the soul. But this soul is multiple." When all of them get along badly, there's one that takes advantage of the discord and takes power. It's always, or almost always, an evil spirit. The good ones never show interest in power. These spirits then create maladies, what we call illnesses. If they dominate men's minds, they act like madmen. They kill, rape, or simply see things and talk to themselves, or hide to die. According to what the main spirit commands them. But who knows what the latter's intentions are? No one can ever know because they don't have the same logic as men.

- And then what do they do?

- We remove them from the bodies and heads of the sick.

- How?

- We extract them from their heads, where they almost always live. First, they are left isolated from all contact for a few days; only the doctor can see them. Every day he examines them and determines where the main spirits live. They're like a government, sir. Sometimes there are

dictatorships, and they're always located in the head, and they're the most dangerous. Sometimes they're simulated democracies, and they settle in different parts of the body. In these cases, many places must be opened and drained to expel them.

"And they live to tell the tale?"

Cahrué laughed.

"Almost always, sir."

"And what about Don Roberto?"

The Indian scratched his chin and frowned. In an urban room and wearing decent clothes, he would have seemed like any other doctor concerned about his patient. In this case, the shack and the semi-nudity gave a sour, discordant, fanciful tone to the situation. But the figure was Elta, and Cahrué's intelligent gaze dispelled all doubt. At that moment, he was an individual full of intelligent and logical ideas, a brain that stood out above every sad idea of a naked and poor body.

"There's an enormous gathering of demons on the left side of his head. There are hundreds, I dare say. They're killing him very slowly. But there's one that dominates over all these smaller demons. He's the one directing this slow-moving plan, but who knows what he's after? There's no way to follow him, not even if he plans to finish him off tomorrow or many years from now. If he'll remain blind, if he'll regain his sight for a while, if it will move to another area of his body."

"But don't you think it's simply a very widespread tumor? That's what the doctors in my country have said."

"And what are tumors, sir? Cells that were once normal and have changed. They grow and grow, invade other tissues, and use them to live." Like men, sir, and while we're at it, I'll tell you, like white men.

"Stop this nonsense! I'm not here to listen to that..."

"So, since we're here... why are you here?"

"I already told you, to try to cure the old man..."

"But you just told me that you don't believe what I'm telling you, but rather what the doctors told you far away."

Maximiliano paused for thought and looked down at his ailing leg. It was improving despite the short time that had passed. It hurt very little, and the wounds were now neat stitches.

"Unfortunately, Cahrué, I believe you more than you think. I've seen some of what you mention, and I've seen it in many other people as well. It's evil, my friend, and I can call it that after what you've done to cure my leg. It's evil, I repeat, the demons who have killed God and are using his bones to build their new world: underground and submerged."

He straightened himself as best he could and tried to direct his gaze outside the door. He saw nothing but darkness.

"Is there no moon today?"

"Half moon..."

"Then this is how the weary body of God rests best. He lies down in the hollow to rest after his eternal labor."

"What labor, sir?"

"The labor they imposed on him since they denied him, Cahrué. He died with the first denial, from his very birth, and he throws his bones from the moon like an exiled spectator. He throws them into the sea, and the demons use them to build cities that will dominate the world."

"You're laughing at me, sir. You do nothing but appropriate our old mythologies and adapt them to your desires."

"Is that so? I haven't read much about you, your ancient cultures, I mean. I'm only saying what I've seen. I've seen images of Jesus degenerated by filthy ideas, tainted by greed and lust." The simplest men, Cahrué, are those who harbor the deepest perversions in their souls.

"So the Christian God is very similar to ours, or perhaps their science is very similar to ours."

"Men are the same."

"And the knives have been the same throughout the centuries."

"What do you mean?"

"That we trepan the skull to extract them. We give them alcohol to drink, that's how the demons are deceived, and when they are confused, they lose temporary control of their governments. Then we open their heads and let them out. Sometimes we have to use tweezers to extract them, but almost always they are trapped under such high pressure that just by opening the bone they are thrown out by their own internal weight, their own accumulated malice."

"And that's what you plan to do with the old man?"

"That's what he should do if you allow it."

"Rest assured, Cahrué, I won't allow it." The old man is like my father, and I won't let him slaughter him.

The Indian shrugged, stood up, and walked toward the opening of the hut. A faint moonlight entered.

"In a few days there will be a full moon. That's when the demons are called most strongly, like the tide, you understand. Think about it, and you'll tell me your decision."

"I want to see him first."

"Tomorrow they'll bring him here. Talk to him, tell him what we'll do; he doesn't want to talk to me or listen to me. But you'll see something

different in him. I'm telling you this so you won't be surprised or scared if you notice it. It's normal given his illness."

"You're deliberately intriguing me, Cahrué. I don't like you playing that way. I thought you were a clean man."

"Like white men, Mr. Iribarne, as much as white men."

24

When he was alone, he heard nothing but the silence of the jungle. Protected by those adobe walls from the cold and the dangers outside, sheltered by the inhabitants of that village and cared for by the one who was perhaps the most capable of them all, he decided to give himself over to rest. For the first time in a long time, the worry about the immediate future was no longer such an unbearable burden, the anxiety of uncertainty Drowsiness had turned into a possible security, surely transitory, most likely fallacious, illusory like any sensation concerning the future. However, the thoughts that dominated his worries that night were no more reassuring. Memories came back to him that hurt him, because he knew he could never recover the objects of affection or the hatred that provoked them.

First, he thought of Elsa, back in Buenos Aires, with no news of him or his father. How worried, restless, so anxious she must have been that he even knew she was capable of taking a boat and sailing upriver in search of them. He longed to be by her side on that cot, to feel her hair on his face like when he had been sick on the boat, to feel the warmth of her hands and her comforting voice in the air of her soft, silky breath. Then he thought about what he had left behind in Cádiz, the memory of the fire at Uncle José's house, the deaths he had left in his wake, like a vengeful vigilante for the humiliations suffered by God. He hadn't done anything wrong, and only now he wondered what was inside him that made him act so accurately, so effectively, and almost without remorse. Only intense pain and the imperious surge of a controlled but uncontrollable rage, a muted rage, like a trumpet emitting an apocalyptic and implacable song as it passed through the world.

He searched his soul, in the early hours of that night, for the cause and remorse of evil, and found only one irrefutable logic: that of the gospel according to Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne. The gospel that united science, theology, and madness. He recognized it as such, and one factor complemented the other. Where science ended, madness began; where madness overflowed, theology acted to channel the motives. And all this within the framework of the night, because the discovery of his uncle's abuses had taken place at night; within the framework of the waters, because the waters had taken Brother Aurelio and he had fled to a promised land, and in the waters of the river he had arrived at that place where he now was. And above all these elements, the moon, like a hated but necessary guide.

Then, in a kind of response, the clouds must have suddenly parted because a spontaneous illumination illuminated the interior of the hut. He could see his body reclining and, after a long time, at peace, clean and serene. He felt the palpitations of his blood in his ailing leg, in the slow processes of healing, scarring, and consolidation of his bones. He felt that at the foot of his bunk were two people he didn't know, but no one was present except him and his thoughts. The thoughts, however, were presences, surrounding them.

Maximiliano's parents had most likely been in that same hut a little over twenty years before. Perhaps they had made love in that hut and conceived him one of those many nights.

He looked to his side, on the floor, and saw Uncle José's notebooks. He lifted them and read the first page; there were two dates written on them. On one: January 1885; on the other: June 1889. He immediately knew what these dates related to, but he mentally counted the months to be sure: forty-two months, the same length of time announced by the passage from the Book of Revelation he had uttered almost unconsciously upon reaching the shore of that river wider than the Jordan, a rushing current, perhaps less memorable than the Euphrates or the Tigris. Yet it was a suitable place for the settlement of biblical beasts, of demons willing to dig into riverbeds until they found the perfect depth for the construction of the cities of hell.

He had come for a reason, he knew for sure. Not probably to spread the word of Christ, but to exercise justice in the name of the old, dead God, confronting the demons with their own weapons: pain and betrayal.

And the surrender of the soul not for its salvation or atonement, but for the consecration and final establishment of punishment, of the law that established its pillars on the muddy bed of anguish and sorrow. A bed of mud that slowly petrifies with the work of the hands and the saliva of the beasts born from the minds of men. Monsters of countless configurations, of multiple and infinite appearances and causes of pain.

The eternal sadness without consolation, the periodic and piercing return of grief.

The repeated frustration, with suction-cup legs, clinging to nightmares never interpreted, never forgotten, provoking sweat and grief in the soul clinging to flimsy frames made of the most constant material: dead flesh.

He opened the first notebook and read by the light of a moon that decided not to go out until well into the morning. The moon and the sun coexisting for a few moments. s for him, so that he could see, in the pages of his past, the confluence of the two phases of God: the moment of his death, and discover, if possible, the cause through that intellectual autopsy, because all reading is a dismemberment, a search in a structure that we will never know how to reassemble.

We arrived a few days ago. I couldn't write anything down in this notebook until today. I don't know why I decided to make these notes, if it took me so

long to start and I hardly feel like writing at night. What to write down, anyway. Most of the events seem fallacious to me, like all journeys: boarding and disembarking ships, carriages, horses. Stays in hotels or pensions. Generally mediocre meals at any inn along the way. I let my brother and his wife convince me to accompany them on this trip. They came on a teaching mission, I only as a tourist. I have no doubt I'll help them during their settling-in period, and it will be my job to leave them alone before returning to Spain and my career. Many voyages await me as a sailor, and I'm eager to spend time with my future comrades in arms. Camaraderie is what suits me. I don't understand or agree with conflicts between couples, much less with the problems of marriage. I've seen my brother and his wife get along like cats and dogs many times, and just as often they indulge in affection that makes my stomach turn. I like women of the street, those who know what to do and how to treat a man, but all the rest of them, even these women I'm talking about when they're just ordinary women of their own homes, seem false and complicated to me. They think one thing, say another, and do something else. Not even they understand each other.

I don't like Altea. Maybe it's jealousy, I admit it. I love my brother, younger by only two years, very much. We've shared so many things: travels, sad memories of our father who died in a robbery, caring for our sick mother, being at her side at both ends of her bed until her death a few years ago. We've spent nights in the city of Cádiz in taverns, alone or with friends, we've exchanged secrets, we've opened up as only two men can, brutally and forcefully. Resentments have been lost in the fights, but the pain has remained like a scar.

I don't know why or for whom I'm writing this. I'm tired tonight. We've finished clearing a clearing in the jungle with machetes, with the help of the natives. I've worked as hard as or harder than they have, and I let Manuel communicate because I don't understand their language. Even Altea has taken a machete and cleared a path through the thicket. Her tall but very thin figure seemed strengthened after the long period of passivity during the sea voyage. She looked refreshed, sweating, her dress wetting. I looked away from her when I noticed her eyeing me for a moment. I turned around to look for Manuel; he wasn't around. I could smell his perspiration. It's wrong to talk about my sister-in-law like that, as if she were talking about a whore. It's nothing like that. But the reluctance has been mutual from the start. I know she's been jealous of the close relationship between my brother and me for a long time.

I'm abandoning this task for tonight. Ten meters from my bed, they're sleeping after making love. I've heard them.

Seven days have passed. I reread what I wrote and remind myself to keep this notebook very carefully. I don't want to have any problems with them; enough with the daily hardships. Perhaps it's the frustration of the difficulties that makes them so upset, and the sight of my indifference. They're building the school. Manuel is in charge of the natives, but they

seem much more experienced in building this type of housing. They know the material they have, but Manuel doesn't seem to notice. He yells and challenges them, and consequently he does the same to me, and I stop him with a gentle slap across the face. Then he remains silent for a second and smiles at me. I go to give him a hug, but he pulls away. I can see in his eyes that he knows what's in my eyes. He doesn't like it as much as he's never liked it.

Today, a man died in construction. The roof collapsed, and it was Manuel's fault. The beams were incorrectly arranged, but he insisted they were placed differently than the natives had said. The man died, and work will have to stop for a week. Altea wanted me to go find the priest from the nearest village, but I refused. The trip meant a boat ride upriver in the middle of a strong summer current, and it would take too long in the jungle, not to mention exposing myself to the huge mosquitoes and snakes. I have a rifle, but I won't use it to protect myself while searching for a priest.

The funeral took place, the ceremony being exclusively with indigenous rites. They buried him standing up, with his head above the ground, in a place that could have been called a cemetery for us, but which they call by a name I don't understand. Altea didn't want to witness it; Manuel stood there, staring, sullen and frowning, glaring at me the whole time. It's true, seeing that savagery, I regretted not having gone to look for a priest. He showed up two weeks later, on his usual visit to the villages in the area. He travels by boat the entire length of the river. Alone, with his cassock like an invalid's vulture, the sleeves of his cassock rolled up, and a hat that protects him from the sun. He must be over forty, but his somewhat childish face makes him look less so. He got out of the boat all sweaty and tired, but with a smile he asked: "Any news?" I laughed in his face and helped him avoid slipping in the mud on the bank. He didn't take it well, but he knows my sarcasm. According to him, I'm the black sheep of the Menéndez Iribarne family. I accompanied him to the village, and he went into the shack he usually used while he stayed in the village. Usually it's no more than a few hours, sometimes no more than two days. An Indian woman cooks his meals and cleans the place. I imagine he must do other tasks for the priest, I have no doubt about it. I've been told in the village that in each place he has a different pretty Indian woman who serves him. In the afternoon, he came out of the shack, topless and in long underwear. He washed his face with cool water from a jar in the shade of a wall. He stretched and stopped to look toward the building that served as the church. I approached him and said, "There was a death two weeks ago; they buried him as usual." He looked at me with annoyance, as if reproaching me for not having called him. Then he shrugged his shoulders and made the sign of the cross. I laughed again, and he looked at me out of the corner of his eye. Then I saw that he wasn't just a priest, he was a man filled with everything men possess: anger, sullenness. I saw the wrinkles in his skin, the hair beginning to thin on his forehead, his eyes squinting in

the painful mid-afternoon light, his thin body, his incipient belly over the worn white underwear that betrayed having been put on a few minutes earlier after an afternoon of pleasure hidden from the pain and frustration of any attempt at evangelization.

He wasn't a priest, he was a man, and I couldn't help but utter an obscenity that between man and man only means complicity, unconditional union as a genus of the human species, union against everything that isn't joy and delight, against every pale, easy, or weak feeling.

The strength of men is in silence and pain.

The school has finally been built. There are fewer than ten indigenous children on good days, otherwise only those closest attend, a few. Altea teaches arithmetic and some geography. Manuel teaches language classes. They don't have a program; they build it according to needs. They are content with the children learning to speak Spanish, to read or write it rudimentarily at least, and to know some arithmetic so as not to be swindled by people from the larger towns or cities. They try to situate them as a tribe within a much larger world, to make them understand the concept that they are a very small, already almost dead, part of a world larger than their jungle and their river. That's what geography is for, they try to instill in them: not a notion of what a map is, because they don't need one to navigate, but a sense of belonging as human beings within the conglomeration of many other human beings. The priest takes care of religion when he arrives every three or more weeks, and each time he comes he must start all over again. The natives have mixed their pagan beliefs with the few Christian symbols they have managed to incorporate after a long time. Before, I've been told, they left their dead in trees. After undergoing some evangelization, they agreed to bury them, but as soon as they are free from the priest's guardianship, they do it as they want or believe: standing up and with their heads above the ground. They say that this way the spirit of the dead can breathe, live with the earth, and not submit to it. The bodies are nourished like trees, and they believe that one day they will revive in this way.

There is an Indian who has gained the trust of us white men. His name is Cahrué. He is still barely a boy, but he is the only student who stands out. He has learned to read extremely quickly and is already writing with some fluency. He is Manuel and Altea's favorite. They take him to our hut, with his parents' permission, and feed him, continuing the lessons outside of regular school hours. He is a very sharp boy; he watches the three of us closely, listens to our conversations, and I believe there is nothing we can hide from him unless we move out of earshot. He gets along well with everyone in the village, all the women in the town would like to have him as a son, and the men send for him to help him in any task. He's strong for his age, but that doesn't mean he neglects his dedication to his studies. I don't know where he finds the time or strength for all he does, because I haven't seen him resting for a single moment. He runs around, talks to people, and

spends time doing things for Altea, although she refuses to use it for menial tasks. Both she and Manuel would like him to dedicate every moment to studying, but I tell them it shouldn't be that way. For the boy, studying is a break from his normal life; he does it with pleasure, and they shouldn't force him to do that. Altea then looks at me as if I were uttering a sacrilege. She thinks, and Manuel has begun to take her side, that everything one does has a purpose, and that purpose should be the center of all our activities. She's obsessive, she's uncompromising. But I can't say that all this isn't something she doesn't demand of herself. It's one of the issues we argue about almost every day, in addition to my "trips" to the jungle or the river, or to the town sixty kilometers away, according to her to visit some brothel, excuses I use to avoid my duties. She's told me several times that if I'm not comfortable there, I can leave. Nothing ties me down, she says.

I think, as I write, that she doesn't know, doesn't understand, or doesn't want to see what's going on. Manuel and I are brothers, and she was an only child. She's incapable of seeing the dependence, the need, the unbreakable bond between us. Manuel has fallen in love, I understand that; she is beautiful, she is intelligent, she is affectionate with him. In a very peculiar way for what I consider her character, she is selfless in her dedication to my brother. The same obsession with perfection in her daily tasks has driven her love for Manuel. But I wonder if it's love or pure self-importance: everything she does, even being in love, must be perfect, even when the other partner is imperfect, in which case she is the one who will be responsible for compensating for such a shortcoming, correcting the mistakes, or at least erasing them.

That's what Altea does; she erases what she doesn't like, what doesn't fit her vision. She doesn't know, then, where to place me in her plan. I don't fit in, I'm out of place, I'm the black sheep in the white flock of her small domestic herd.

I haven't written for almost three months. I've been sick; a very high fever kept me in bed for several weeks. Today I got up for the first time in a long time without bone pain. I checked my desk drawer and found this notebook, which I had almost forgotten during my feverish attacks. There were times when I feared they would find it and read it. But the more a secret is exposed, the less it is revealed. It seems untrue, but it's almost a rule of custom. They sent for a doctor to examine me after my condition worsened. At first, I said nothing; I worked and crawled into bed covered up to my head, suffering from bouts of chills and sweat that soaked the cloths. Manuel got angry when he found out I was hiding. I gave him a naive smile, which I know he likes, although he knows I do it to overcome his barrier of anger and worry. "You're not going to convince me this time," he said, as he has so many times before, but I managed to get him to pat me affectionately on the back. He felt my sweat on his hand and became worried again. "You're burning up with fever," he told me. He went out, and I heard him send Cahrué to find the doctor in the nearest town. That meant waiting at least two or three days. He went back in and searched a closet

for some dry cloths. He called Altea and asked her to bring warm water. She looked at me without shame, realizing, however, that this wasn't another of my strategies to separate them, and went in search of water. When she returned with two basins and a girl helping her, Manuel freed me from the cloths and said he would wash me. "You go into that filthy river and expose yourself to every possible disease," he said, his voice warm. Altea laughed. "It's the women of the village who give him the diseases, in my opinion," she said. Manuel glanced at her. "My dear, please come out." Altea fixed her hair and walked out, holding the girl's hand.

That afternoon and that evening, and for the next two days, Manuel became my older brother; he was more than a father; he was my closest friend. He cared for me, fed me, lifted my head to give me a drink, fixed my pillow, and cleaned me every time I finished relieving myself. He gave me some herbs that an old woman from the village had recommended to him, even though he didn't believe in them. I felt much better. When the doctor arrived, my fever was gone, and the pain in my back had almost subsided. After examining me, he asked for a urine sample. I did so in a clean jar, which he held up to the light for a long time, then poured it onto a piece of paper, observing its color, consistency, and wateriness. It wasn't very different from what the old woman who had come to see me two days earlier had done. who gave me the herbs.

For three weeks, I could barely move. The doctor returned several times and said the infection had attacked my joints, perhaps permanently, so I should rest to prevent the inflammation from increasing, which would subside in a shorter or longer time, I couldn't say for sure. Altea and Manuel were there when he said this. I asked if I would become an invalid. The doctor vigorously shook his head, saying, "Don't worry about that; you'll be able to resume your normal life soon." I saw Altea giggle, which she tried to hide with her hand. "All he's interested in is returning to his debauchery, so he's completely fine now; he's our old José," she said in a low voice to Manuel and the doctor as they left. I heard her, of course, which was what she wanted.

When the first warm spring weather began, Manuel and I decided to go hunting. I was completely recovered. I exercised every morning and took a hot bath with the buckets Cahrué brought me from the fire he lit especially for that purpose. The boy had become emotionally attached to us and gradually distanced himself from his family. The townspeople are both proud and resentful. He himself told them he wants to be like the doctor who came to see me. Altea let out a cheer when she heard this, and Manuel congratulated him by shaking his hand like a gentleman. Cahrué's eyes shone with emotion at this gesture. Since then, he spends almost the entire day at our house. On sunny afternoons, the three of us go to the river and dive completely naked. Sometimes the boy climbs onto Manuel's or my shoulders as we walk back, wearing only his underwear, letting the sun dry our skin. But he's already heavy, so we let them fall, and he laughs with that openness, that natural gift of thinking and seeing everything without prejudice. The camaraderie we enjoy is threatened by the shadow of the

house we know we must return to. Altea greets us with a sullen look. She looks at them with disapproval and shame, at me with tangible loathing, which I know will one day turn into outright hatred.

The day we went hunting with Manuel, Cahrué wanted to join us, and we saw no problem. In fact, it's me who likes to hunt. Manuel doesn't have a rifle, so we take turns using mine. He sees this pastime as the word implies, not a job or an obsession, but a time of relaxation, of tranquility, of communion with nature. Communion with what the word implies: incorporating what is hunted. Isn't the Holy Eucharist a modified form of the ancient rite of sacrifice and the incorporation of another's body into our own? This is what I think, and every animal I've killed, I've used to eat or given to others. I make no excuses, I don't diminish my guilt. Hunting satisfies me, it fills me with a spirit that contrasts with my usual mediocrity. I find courage when I go hunting. I know my hands are weak, my nails fragile, my arms susceptible to multiple injuries, so I'm not ashamed to use a rifle against the claws and strength of predators.

We knew we weren't going to find anything but quail, turtles, and otters. I'd been told there were lynxes in the area, yet we didn't find any. But the purpose of recording this outing isn't to describe the jungle, the evening light between the treetops, the cries of the birds interrupted by two or three shots from Manuel, several from me, and two failed attempts by the boy. What I want to describe is when my brother and I stopped to eat. "Go get some water," Manuel told the boy. He walked away. Manuel said to me: "I'm asking you to stop bothering my wife." I looked at him as if he were joking, but it wasn't. "I don't understand." "Don't act like a whore, you provoke her, you insinuate things. It's not your style or your interest, so I know why you do it." I only responded with another question. "Because," he replied, "you resent us, and you want to take it out on her." "Who said such things to you, may I ask?" "No one is needed, I've seen it, and you yourself don't realize it." There was anguish in his eyes. There was the pain of helplessness. I would have wished things were different. He would have wished things were different. His motive is his grief for me, my motive is my love for him.

The three of us returned in silence. Cahrué looked at us with sadness and incomprehension. We went into the house without speaking. He got into bed with his wife. I went to bed thinking about the rifle.

I'll be going hunting alone soon.

I know, of course, who put all this in Manuel's head. Why else would Altea have said nothing to us when we returned? She knew our silence was the result of an argument between siblings. The same irritation persisted all morning. Morning, but we avoided seeing each other. I ran into Altea several times, and without refusing to greet me, she looked at me haughtily, satisfied, sensing in her eyes an almost generous almsgiving of sorrow. That was what angered me the most. The second time I noticed

that look, I was tired from working on the repairs the priest had asked me to make to the house that served as a church. I saw Altea coming toward me, I saw that hateful look, and when she had passed, something made me stop and turn around. She sensed the halt in my steps, and couldn't help feeling morbidly curious to see what her tactic had caused. She turned around to look at me too. "Tired, José?"

I saw in front of me a tower of immense height, a tower of pure iron covered in thick snow. To touch it was to remain attached to its evil; to look at it was to go blind.

I was carrying a wooden plank over my right shoulder. I dropped it to the ground and approached Altea. I grabbed her jaw and bit her lip. She pulled away after a fleeting moment in which I felt her desire. She would have wanted something else, but her motive was ambivalent. She wanted me and couldn't have me. And what she could have was threatened with being taken away by the very thing she desired.

The year passed amid tribal rites and celebrations of pagan gods. Beneath the surface of these people's customs, there are things they've never shown the white man. The school we set up seems like a pretentious attempt to teach someone who knows more than us. A week ago, three Indians arrived in three boats. Behind them lived younger helpers with many wooden artifacts and boxes. I stopped to watch them unload everything from the boats and begin moving it toward the hut they had prepared for the newcomers a few days earlier. I asked Cahrué who they were, thinking of some kind of carnival. "They're the tribe's witch doctors." "But don't they live here?" "They go from town to town; ours is just one village of our tribe." "And how many are there in total?" "All of this, sir, all of it is ours." "How much is all of it, Cahrué?" The boy pointed around, as if powerless to show him what he wanted. "What the teacher says is the world, sir. Everything you see is ours, since the time of the gods."

Since that night, noises, songs, and shouts have been heard from the sorcerers' hut. The preparations have not stopped, day or night. Altars are erected, food is prepared, substances that emit horrible and strange odors that invade the village at all times. I literally flee to the river and spend hours lying on the riverbank, plugging my ears with grease to avoid hearing the songs. My brother and Altea try to continue with school, but for two days now, no child has attended, except for Cahrué. Manuel accompanies me sometimes, tired of all those preparations and his wife's bad mood. I told him this afternoon: "You should take her to the jungle and make love to her like a savage. That's what some women need as relief from their hysteria." He looked at me with the same desolation in his eyes as when our mother died. "Go back to Spain or wherever you want; I don't want to see you here tomorrow." As he was about to leave, I grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him to the ground. He didn't fight back; he stayed still, waiting for I don't know what, my next move, my word. I extended my arm to help him, but he didn't accept it. He got up on his own. Without daring to look me in the face, he turned and left. I would have

liked to hug him tightly, hold him in my arms, and press him against my body as if he were my own body, the most precious part of myself. And even more loved, because he wasn't myself, and therefore didn't have my faults or my defects. He was a much better version of myself, the one our parents had tried for a second and last time. Ultimately, I was master of my powerlessness. He was master of himself.

I didn't leave, but I avoid crossing his path. I'm working on the church renovations, while preparations for the healing rites are already finished. That's what it's all about, Cahrué told me, translating what I tried to ask the villagers. The witch doctors were barely visible. They were praying, preparing themselves spiritually for the ceremonies. But who will they heal, I asked. "A crazy old man who lives locked in his hut." "I've never seen him." "Because he lives locked away by his family. The whole family is like that; they say they're possessed by demons. But he's the craziest. He was the tribal chief for a long time, many years ago. When he killed all his children, they locked him up. Since then, we haven't had a chief. What he knows is necessary to govern, but he can't do it because of the demons."

I don't speak to anyone but Cahrué. I stew in my anger alone, every hour of my day. I work harder than ever before; I need to vent my hatred on material things. I bang on boards, I apply all my strength to hammering nails. Then I dive into the river, and my hatred cools a little. I feel my strength overflowing; I feel the same as always, but increased tenfold, like when I repress my sexual satisfaction. That's what I need. I think of the women from the brothel in the old village, and I'm disgusted by their smell, their sickly appearance. I think of the men, it's true, I can't help it anymore, but this time that's not what I'm looking for. I don't know what I'm looking for, or I do know, and I don't dare admit it.

The thump of the tribal drums has begun. Night falls. The witch doctors' assistants come out with their prepared vessels; the women aren't even assistants, but mere specters hovering around the sacred witch doctors. I see them coming out of the house, dressed in their best ceremonial robes. A loose black tunic open at the front, revealing the old men's sunken chests and dangling genitals. They stand in the center of a circle of men. The circle opens and the crazy old man appears, naked, brought in by two others. They throw him to the ground, and the old man writhes in the dust, alternately emitting screams and whispers. He tires and starts again. They let him act until he tires. Perhaps two hours pass. I grow tired of looking and look for Cahrué in the crowd; I can't find him. I see Manuel approaching the circle, timidly, as if asking permission to witness the rite. One of the old men nods. Manuel sits on the ground and awaits what will happen.

Suddenly, a group begins to dance around the crazy man. They spin around and around to the incessant rhythm of the drums. The lights from the bonfires are the only ones that illuminate the night. There are no stars or moon. I imagine the forest: darkness and silence. The madman stands up and writhes in frantic convulsions, as if he were about to dismember

himself, to harm himself, but this is something he's been doing for many years, and he continues to live with his madness. One of the witch doctors approaches him and places a hand on his back. The assistants, three of them, hold him still, yet he writhes with strength he draws from who knows where. The witch doctor begins to chant a litany; the other two stand up and join the first. The madman slowly calms down. He seems to open his eyes, sees the three witch doctors, his own age, perhaps with his same wisdom, but dominated by benevolent spirits. Then the assistants suddenly and without warning from the doctors turn the old man onto the ground. The latter kneel beside the madman, many torches now surrounding them. Someone approaches with something metallic in his hands; it's a gleam that sparkles unmistakably in the light from the bonfires and torches. An instrument rises above the group of men crowded around the prone body. Seen from a distance, they resemble a Caravaggio painting, multiple and maintaining the exact symmetry required, the exact lighting so that each man's expression is perfectly visible. The anxiety of the expectors, the awe of the assistants, the coldness of the scholars, the atrocious madness on the old man's face. And in the center, the scalpel, the knife, the dagger, the axe.

I see how the element descends toward the old man's head and penetrates.

And the intense scream has unleashed more drums and more heart-rending screams from women and children, and in that scream, I tear at my sweat-soaked shirt, powerless to bear the pain, the tears, the need. I run under the shadow of the huts and enter my brother's. I knock on the flimsy shutter and face Altea, standing in the middle of the dark room. I smell her scent, palpable in the air like a dense substance expelled by her body. I approach and touch her, but she rejects me. My arousal manifests in an embrace so strong that I fear I'll tear her apart, and, lifeless, I'll be left without a response. Because I don't want to make love with a body, but with an entity that responds to me, that exhales the same thing I exhale: pain and perversion.

Altea is digging her nails into my forearms to separate herself. I embrace her and bite her neck and lips, her breasts, which I reveal when I tear her dress. She is naked and shuddering, naked, and my body clings to her with sweat, with the ashes of the bonfires that fly and scatter through the village. There are mingled aromas in the air, products of the substances the elders have ordered to be prepared. Outside, the screams continue; the trepanation of the crazy old man must be progressing. A primitive stiletto penetrates the cranial cavity in search of a demon. I shed all vestiges of humanity and push Altea against the wall. She cries and hits me, but she knows nothing can stop me. Then, already on the bed she shares with my brother, I penetrate her. And she screams, but no one can hear her, because there are sounds louder than the sounds of pain. They are the sounds of fury, the screams locked away, accumulated since ancient times. They are the ancestors. Her screams were masked by the silence.

And when I finished, I screamed furiously and hit her. She was alive, but she closed her eyes, she said nothing, she didn't move. Her body, lacerated by my nails, had blood and saliva on her breasts and face, and semen overflowed from her genitals onto the bed. I lifted some with my fingers

and ran them over her lips. She licked them, without opening her eyes, in pain, almost dead, but remembering everything that had happened.

Outside, the wise men's fight against the evil spirits continued. I put on my pants and went out. The attendants danced frenetically, more joyfully. They seemed to be celebrating liberation and the expulsion of demons. The lights of the bonfires moved in the breeze caused by the dancers, casting strange shades of color on the night sky, on the reddish dust, on the dark skin of the Indians. For a moment, I thought I saw the northern lights, but it was impossible. Perhaps they were the freed spirits. Where would they go now, I wondered, in whose body would they reside? I stopped to look at those lights, I saw them dance all over the area, approaching me with peculiar slowness, hovering around me, exploring me. I sat on the ground, far from any presence. I looked at my hands. And I accepted. I accepted everything I had done and what I would do. There would be no more struggles in my life. Everything would slowly adapt to the new idea that now illuminated me.

What I have done is what I am.

Two days later, the old madman was walking through the village, accompanied by his daughters. His elderly wife followed behind, head bowed and silent. The man was smiling under a cloth that protected the wound made by the witches. The daughters laughed and greeted everyone. Cahrué later told me that the witch doctors would soon return to heal them. They weren't healthy, even if they seemed that way. I asked him if they could heal any white men, and he shrugged.

Altea took two weeks to heal her wounds. She didn't speak a word during that time. Manuel found her that same night, and like a madman, he went looking for me everywhere. He found me in the river, treating the same wounds she had. He made the gesture of killing me right there, but he trembled so much that he began to cry and knelt, hugging my legs. I placed a hand on his head, like a consoling priest.

For two weeks, the women took care of Altea. Manuel slept outside. He didn't speak to her or me. He didn't seem sad or angry, just isolated, as calm as ever. I envied that capacity for apparent self-absorption, and like all envy, it was filled with fury and hatred. All my love for him had turned to resentment.

I'm writing today because these are personal chronicles. Therefore, I must note that Altea announced today that she's pregnant. Manuel came to tell me, since we no longer live in the same shack. He told me of his decision to return to Spain. Tomorrow he'll go out and buy tickets to Buenos Aires and will send a telegram to an acquaintance to get two tickets for the next departure.

Very early this morning, I went to see Altea. I asked her if she'd be carrying my child. "No," she replied. "I'll be carrying Manuel's child." I know it's a lie, because they haven't slept together since that night. "I was already pregnant that night. I was about to tell Manuel, but there wasn't a chance afterward, of course." This time, I felt nothing but a strong urge to laugh. The demons, perhaps, were in charge of calming me down, slowing down and refining the quality of the hatred.

Tonight is a full moon. I sit at my table in front of the window overlooking the river. I think and plan many things to do. I will use the nights we have left together to carve a silver cross.

Today they set out for Buenos Aires. They boarded a freighter at the town dock. I watched them walk away in their best clothes, side by side, surrounded by their suitcases. They left the school behind, and no indigenous people have come to see them off. Cahrué ran after Altea when I signaled him to. I saw him give her the silver cross as a farewell gift, a token of gratitude from the entire town for what she had done for the children. She began to cry, and Manuel comforted her, but his eyes were also shining.

Whoever reads this will think that what I have done has been a kind thing. I don't think so. That cross is a link that unites us, a representation of something that will unite us forever. I will return to Cádiz not long after, when the child is born. Perhaps there will be an accident, or a storm on these tempestuous South American rivers or on the unpredictable Atlantic. Perhaps they will be trapped by Indians and firearms. Whatever happens will be the heritage of providence.

Then I will appear, distressed, to take on my duty as an uncle. I will raise the child—I know it will be a boy—I will raise him and tell him about his devoted parents. A few years later, when he is capable of understanding, I will give her the cross I will have kept after tearing it from the corpse of her mother, lost forever.

She will surely admire it, forming a full smile on her beautiful face, as beautiful as Altea's and as profoundly strange as her father's.

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She dropped the second notebook to the floor. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. The night remained the same, the place was the same. No more than three hours had passed since she began reading the manuscripts, and in all that time she couldn't stop, couldn't tear her eyes away from those papers with Uncle José's handwriting. It was as if she were reading the life of another man she had known, as if it were a dramatic novel she had invented. Neither her parents nor her uncle were recognizable, not the people mentioned, not even Cahrué himself, who was only a child at the time, totally incompatible with the man she had met only

the day before. And despite all this apparent incongruity between what he'd read and the surrounding reality, he knew it was all true: both what surrounded him at that moment and what was written on those papers. Never had the past become so concrete to him, never so present as at that moment. Because in that way, in the way it manifested itself, the past gave meaning to many things in the present. It not only constituted the explanation, but the perfect chord for the lurid melodies that until then had constituted the reasons for his life.

However, something like betrayal seeped into his soul. It intruded into his mind until it told him that it was all a trap perpetrated by his ancestors. Each generation was deceived with impunity by the previous one, brought into the world without permission, plucked from nowhere to be imprisoned within prisons of skin and bones, subjected to the cruelty of time, the abandonment of all hope, the apathy of one's own will, and the explicit violence of love. It was all sex, flesh, and disillusionment.

Catastrophe and love were the same word, created at the beginning of time.

So, if that was the case, he must be like that beast who, with his own lips, declared the world's domination by heresy.

If I am not who I thought I was, Maximilian told himself, I will be who I deserve to be.

He decided to get out of bed, first lowering his broken leg. It was stiff from the boards holding it. He rested it on the floor and felt no pain. He lowered the other leg and tried to stand. His legs supported him, to his satisfaction. He felt them, but they were numb. The pain had perhaps moved from them to his heart, because he knew that the growing anguish was lodged there, and that the anger, even attenuated, was contained by common sense. So now he had to take advantage of the still harmonious synchronization between his body and mind. He tore a loose piece of wood from the walls and used it as a crutch. He walked to the door. The night continued to hide everything, saying, as always, that everything was there, and it should be there: the darkness of the human soul and the baseness of the divine.

He raised his eyes to the sky and saw the moon. Large, as immense as a cadaverous sun hurtling down upon the world. So enormous, clear, perfect, with its spectral figures drawn on the surface. Indecipherable, chaotic, shifting like changing spirits. And he saw how the sad figure of God continued to carry his own bones to throw them into the waters. But from every corner of the world, that task could be appreciated, like a cinematographic projection in the sky. God's movements did not have the clumsiness or the rapidity of Lumiere's films. They also had colors that were both ochre and brilliant. Every inhabitant of the world could appreciate them: God as his own executioner and gravedigger. He wondered why only he, then, had noticed those movements so long before. As if there was something in his eyes that allowed him to do so, just like what he had seen in the left eye of some who had passed through his life. Brother Aurelio, Don Roberto, Uncle José, and the captain's wife. Some had died because of this, but the vision continued, as if it were a spirit escaping

from the corpse to enter another living being. Or, perhaps, it was something within his own vision, the same illness that had led them to see those images that bothered him so much, to the point of needing to expel them from the world with death.

Are we instruments, or creators? This is what Maximiliano wondered as he walked through the deserted night streets of the village, between adobe huts and dogs that watched him pass without barking. He was a ghost, perhaps, in the light of the immense moon, which the animals respected like a benevolent mother. The constancy of the moon was almost the only virtue in the world. Its cyclical returns provoked anxiety and relief, pain and bliss. The moon was both woman and man. and at the same time. Woman as a continent, man as pain. Calm and storm. Tides and ebbs of seas of blood. The ancient sacrifices to the sun were nothing more than veiled sacrifices to the moon. God did not dwell in the sun, because it is only fire whose embers will one day be extinguished. The moon, on the other hand, is illuminated stone, and will be dark stone when everything disappears.

Stone and dust, bones poking out to contemplate the earth's surface.

He walked aimlessly, toward what he thought was the interior of the jungle. Not much further on, he found the area where the indigenous people buried their dead. In the moonlight, he saw the skulls sticking out of the ground. He had read in Uncle José's notebooks that they buried them upright, leaving the heads outside. Now he could verify it, and twenty years didn't seem to have changed the custom. Walking among the graves, he found heads of men buried no more than a few months before; others were very recent and seemed simply dormant. Their hair was almost intact, their eye sockets still full, their skin still loose from the bones of their faces. He advanced fearlessly, overcome with curiosity and fascination. He reached the oldest areas, where the skulls were bare, others with skin as dry as parchment.

He knew then that this was the place where he would begin to find his answers. Diseases of the soul, diseases of the head. What was the cause of madness, of hallucinations, of the desire to kill? Why had he not been able to fully believe in God, and why had others been able to see him while he had not? In knowledge, he believed he had found the path. He had read the anatomy books in his uncle's library. He still clearly remembered the anatomical structure of the bones of the skull. He thought of the sphenoid bone, like a small buried bird, caught mid-flight in the middle of men's heads.

A bird that perhaps still preserved its ancestral memory of lost times. What some men were seeing might have been projections of that memory.

He looked up at the surrounding treetops. A faint glow hinted at dawn. He had to take those skulls back to the hut to study them. He searched the surrounding area for some tools, but finding nothing useful, he returned to the hut and picked up the shovel leaning against a wall. The walk back and forth made his leg ache and ache again. At first, he ignored it, then he began to limp. The planks holding it loosened in their bindings. He felt the

broken bones in his leg shift, trapping his veins and nerves. But he was determined not to let anything stop him from continuing with his purpose. It was something he had to do for himself, and also for Don Roberto. He had promised Elsa that he would do everything possible to heal him. They had brought him to that jungle for that very reason; he had come to that jungle in the supposed ignorance of his escape, crossing their paths. If he had known love in the labyrinths of madness, it was something he should be fully satisfied about. He probably wouldn't see Elsa again.

He returned to the spot and began to slash open the skulls. He didn't strike them, but made a sharp cut with the edge of the shovel just below the ground. He cut one by one, from different places and times. Some new, others very old. In the oldest, he saw holes in the head, surely the aftermath of the trepanations he had read about in the notebooks. He spent almost two hours doing this, and it was already dawn. His leg hurt intensely, and he had to continue on his knees for the last hour. He cut off heads and placed them in cloth bags stolen from a shack along the way. He didn't count how many he had managed to gather, but the bags had already been filled. His once-healthy knee was now injured. The planks had been torn from his diseased leg, and his bones were shifting. He stood up and fell, and the pain would return, insisting on it until he achieved the greatest possible numbness. He wanted to destroy his nerves to continue doing what he was doing, to put aside, to abandon the parts of his body that prevented the soul's redemption.

He listened to the awakening of the nearby village, the bustle of people, the cries of babies, the calls of men going fishing or fetching water from the river. He still didn't know how to get up or leave that field of dead bodies with empty places where heads had been. He didn't know how the inhabitants would react to the sacrilege. He didn't know, above all, how to get to his hut with the bags full of skulls in the midst of all those people, or how to tolerate the pain that ebbed and flowed like waves of despair.

He tried to stand up, leaning on one of the planks that had supported his leg. He managed to stay upright. He bent down to pick up the bags. He carried one with his right arm, over his back. He carried the other over his left shoulder. With his free hand, he used the plank as a crutch. He took the first step. He managed to do it, and felt hopeful, but he had done it with his good leg. Now came the test: taking the step with the crutch, without putting weight on his bad leg. He did it, but the plank, splintered, caught in the mud and rocks around the graves. Maximilian collapsed with the full weight of the bags on him. But that wasn't the worst of it; he and the weight he was carrying fell on his broken leg. Then a scream rose from his throat, but it was as if someone else had emitted it, so intense in its cruel wisdom of a desolate cry that he didn't recognize himself. He had never screamed when killing, even though on each occasion it was a way of tearing out his hatred like someone tearing off a part of his own body. He fell sideways, but remained almost collapsed on the ground, his leg shattered and broken in several places. He shrugged off the bags and looked at his leg, still screaming and crying in pain. Bones protruded from the skin, torn in several places, and he was bleeding profusely. He held it in his hands, swaying, his expression tearful and his face scrunched up,

holding back his screams. They would come to him soon, but he didn't want to be rescued. He needed to flee from there to the hut and begin his study of the skulls, and the others wouldn't leave him alone. They would take the bags, lock him in the hut, heal him, perhaps. But he had to find out first, ridding himself of all weakness or negligence. If his inheritance was pain and hatred, fine, he would inherit them like one who receives a treasure to care for, but he wouldn't make that heritage a realm of vulgarity or idleness. It would be a realm of voluntary knowledge, of redemption in the realms of resentment, if it couldn't be in those of kindness or patience. In the absence of virtues, hostile will was welcome. A child appeared in the thicket, on the path leading to the village. He was looking at it, and then others appeared. One of them left, perhaps in search of one of his parents. He had to do something immediately; he couldn't abandon himself to their hands; he hadn't arrived and suffered all that to now yield to the will of others. His leg was the only impediment. If any part of your body prevents you from entering the Kingdom of Heaven, then cut it off, he told himself. He wouldn't enter that kingdom, he knew, but it might as well have entered hell: God's bones were being collected there. Two women joined the children, trying to get closer, but they didn't dare. A man arrived, spoke to the women, pointing to the graves. They weren't alarmed, they just seemed curious. Another man tried to approach him, but Maximilian threw a stone at him. He gathered several around him to ward off the men like carrion birds. That strategy wouldn't last much longer. "Sir!" Cahrué's voice called.

Maximilian looked there, at the man who had once been the boy who had known his parents, who had eaten and lived with them. The only link, the bond he considered indestructible, between the past and the present. He began to cry again in pain. Cahrué began to approach.

"Don't come! Leave me alone!"

"What do you want to do? Forget about that and let me treat your leg."

"There's nothing left to treat," he replied as he raised the shovel, and with all his strength brought the blade down on the leg.

He thought he would faint. The treetops danced a carousel. The buried dead seemed to rise headless like stony columns from the earth. But it was nothing more than hallucinations. When the pain passed, the others were still far away, and he knew that only a few seconds had passed. The leg was no longer bleeding; it was simply an open wound with dried blood. The severed piece lay at one side, and he grabbed it with his right hand. He looked at it, then at the others, who were watching him. The women covered the children's eyes, but they struggled to escape their arms and look at the man who had severed his own leg. Cahrué approached to within two meters of him.

"Sir, let me help you," but before he could touch him, Maximiliano raised the shovel and threatened him.

"I'm not finished yet."

He didn't know where he'd gotten such resilience. He wasn't a strong man; he always believed himself to be puny, weak, more dedicated to intellectual

than physical pursuits. But perhaps so many things he'd been through had strengthened him. Or perhaps it was the beast inside him that was giving him the strength to do everything he thought he should accomplish.

With the edge of the same shovel, he began to peel away the leg bone. Slowly but firmly, he extracted the tibia fragment, now cleansed of muscle and blood. The open stump throbbed, and every moment he thought he might faint. But there was no bleeding, and that was enough. The painIt could be resisted, just like fatigue. His mind continued to organize, and his hands worked diligently on the most important task they had ever undertaken.

That shinbone would be his symbol from now on: an amulet for providence, a key to his own sanctuary, the coat of arms of a king, the lightning striker of an angry god. Whatever it was to the others, it would serve to make him a feared figure in that town. And that's what happened: he held the clean bone high, looked around, and saw himself as the others must have seen him: a man beginning to rise in the middle of the graves, almost naked and holding his body on one leg, skillfully maintaining his balance, and now pain-free, he used the shovel as a crutch, lifted the bags of skulls onto his shoulders, and began to walk, threatening anyone who tried to get in his way with the bone like a deadly weapon. He walked back along the path that led to the hut, between the rows of the villagers, who were now many, who looked at him with fear in their eyes, with respect, with profound reverence. Even Cahrué, so imbued with skepticism by the wisdom he had learned from his books, could only let him pass and be content to follow him. Now he was his disciple, as if he had returned to that child who learned in exchange for services to the white man.

He reached the hut, and before entering, he turned to look at them all. The entire village watched him with intrigue, with amazement, with a budding veneration. He ordered Cahrué that no one should enter. Then, in the coolness of the interior, he dropped the bags and collapsed onto the cot, sinking into the deep abysses of the new seas, the seas of bones, the aquatic cities of the demon founders of a new kingdom he was helping to build. For days he drifted in and out of the borders of consciousness. He saw Cahrué's face peeking through the edges of his fever-clouded vision. He felt hands touching the stump of his leg. He dreamed he was amputating it, but he had already done it himself. He heard chants coming from the village, and thought he saw the dancing around the hut, the offerings, the prayers, for him, whom they barely knew, who was nothing more than a sick and crazy white man. He saw the painted faces burning substances around the cot, paints that simulated lynx faces. Then, one of those masks began to fade from the sweat of the fever, and Uncle José's face appeared. Then he knew that the other two old men performing those rites in his hut were his parents. They were old, but all three had survived. He wanted to hug them, wanted to have a life with them. He never knew exactly how many days had passed. He woke up, finally lucid, and looked at his naked body. He was too thin, and the severed leg had a stump sewn up. It didn't hurt; he was livid but healthy. He rubbed his face and felt his long hair and growing beard.

"Welcome to life," he heard the voice say in a corner of the hut. It was midday, perhaps, from the glare that penetrated through the openings.

Cahrué emerged from the shadows.

"Where are the bags?" Maximiliano asked.

Cahrué laughed.

"He comes back from near death and the first thing he asks is about the dead. I don't know what he planned to do with those heads, but I kept them. I can't return them to their owners or to their relatives. Many entire families have disappeared, nor am I allowed to burn them. I hid them in that dry corner."

Maximiliano looked where he was pointing. He began to get up. A faintness stopped him. Cahrué held him so he wouldn't fall.

"He's still not completely well; he needs to eat and get better. Then he'll do whatever he wants."

Maximilian asked for the tibia bone. The other man bent down and pulled it out from under the cot. He placed it on Maximilian's body, and he held it like a scepter.

Cahrué laughed again.

"He looks like a great king."

The mockery didn't sit well with Maximilian.

"You'll think I'm crazy. I'm sure I am. But I've read the notebooks you gave me. I want you to teach me everything about the old healers who perform trepanations."

"The old men you're talking about no longer exist. They died many years ago. They managed to teach their disciples a few tricks, but less than half of their wisdom has survived."

"Were you one of them?"

"I was the only one, sir." But like I told you, I went to school in the city, and I learned a lot in medical school.

"Are you really a doctor?"

"They didn't allow me to get a degree. Things aren't like they are in Europe here, I guess."

"Then you must teach me everything you know. There are things I must find out. Not just because of Don Roberto. I have theories about hallucinations, about the hidden desires of the mind."

"You're talking about the organic causes of mental illness. What my ancestors called spirits."

"That's right. And with trepanations they performed that kind of scientific exorcism."

"The last attempt in this village was made more than ten years ago. I tried it myself."

"Tell me."

"First you must eat. Here comes the old woman."

The woman caring for him brought a bowl of water and a plate of roast meat. Maximilian began to eat without cutlery, hungry as he had never been before. The woman knelt beside him and said a prayer. Then she stood up and left without turning her back on him.

"What was that?"

"They adore you, sir. After what you did to his leg, they respect you like a god."

"I thought they were going to kill me for desecrating the graves."

"That doesn't matter anymore after seeing your courage." There's a kind of legend embedded in our mythology about a man who amputated one of his feet every day, because each morning it grew back and at night it began to gangrene. It was a kind of curse he had upon him. So one day he cut his leg higher than usual, and with the tibia he carved a bone knife, which he used to cut off his foot the next time it grew. That way the curse was lifted.

"That means everything is buried within oneself." And he pointed to his head.

"I think so. That's why they respect you; you reminded them of this somewhat forgotten legend. They've become enthusiastic about this new veneration that separates them from routine. We're dying out, sir. Civilization advances, the customs of progress invade us. They change our lives, they also kill us. Because adapting means no longer being ourselves. Cultures clash, and they die. There's no integration. It doesn't exist. There can't be. Don't believe what the books say." "You've read a lot, Cahrué. You lied to me when you told me you didn't speak Spanish well. I see you dressed like that, with that loincloth, your dark skin, your strong body, your hairless face, and it doesn't fit with what my culture has taught me. However, my friend, if I can call you that because you saved my life twice, and because you've known my parents, spoken with them, slept in their same hut..."

He stopped because a large lump formed in his throat.

"I don't understand..."

"They died as soon as they returned to Spain, after I was born. I can't say I have any memory of them. Except for the silver cross you showed me, and which you gave to my mother. Tell me, what was she like?"

"Very beautiful, tall, very stern, but with a beauty very similar to that of a Greek statue."

"Cold, perhaps?"

"I don't know. With me and the children, she was polite, nothing more." But that didn't interest us; just seeing her enraptured us; just being with her was enough for us.

"It was seduction, I suppose. The same as with my father."

"They weren't demonstrative, sir. They were a discreet couple. They were that way until the end, when they left."

"You stayed with José Iribarne?"

"I served him while he stayed. He didn't teach me anything else, except about the generalities of life. I was a teenager, and he took me to the big town to be with the whores. That was his lesson on the subject; you know how these things are."

"I thought they had initiation rites in your town."

"They've been put aside now; few remember them. Besides, those of us who are aware of what's happening to our people don't want children who suffer or hate us. If it's all over, let it be over once and for all. Like wise death, sir."

"Are you married, Cahrué?"

"No, sir." I wouldn't be happy with anyone from my town in my current circumstances. Who would I talk to and spend my life with like I'm talking to you? The only reason to join a woman would be to have children, and I've already given you my opinion on that. And where is your wife?

"She's in Buenos Aires now, waiting for us. Maybe if you came with us, Cahrué, you'd meet someone who appreciates your culture."

"I'm already a circus phenomenon in the town when I go, imagine in Buenos Aires."

"On the contrary, I know that city very little, but if it's as cosmopolitan as they say, maybe they'll have enough sensitivity to appreciate it."

"I don't think so; I'm fine here."

"He hides like a recluse, Cahrué. He hides behind the facade of his tribe."

The other nodded, shrugging, like a boy. He was older than him, like an older brother, with whom he could have talked about many things during his afternoons in Cádiz. A friend he never had. Someone who could have saved him from many things. But now evening was falling in the jungle. A cool breeze dispersed the smell that was beginning to invade the hut from the corner.

"We must begin our task as soon as possible, tomorrow. We must dissect the heads. You must teach me the trepanation techniques. When we're ready, we'll operate on Don Roberto."

Cahrué began to laugh.

"But sir, you don't know anything about medicine, and I've never operated on anyone." of the brain in many years, only broken bones, swollen bellies, complicated births, nothing more.

"Didn't you tell me you were studying Don Roberto?"

"Yes, and I've come to the conclusion that he has a tumor compressing the back of his left eye socket."

"They already said that in Spain, but can it be removed?"

"Everything can be removed."

"Without risk to his life?"

"I can't know that until I've trepanned him."

"Then we'll start tomorrow. I want you to bring your instruments to the hut. I'll take care of studying the heads; I just need your instruments."

"And will you know how to do it, sir?"

"I've read too, Cahrué. I grew up reading in Don José's library; I lived with him after my parents died."

"How I wish he'd taken me with him when he left..."

"Did he ask you?"

"Yes, and he told me he would." But he only said this to calm me down while he made preparations for his trip. He was more reserved than ever. He missed his brother. The day he left, I woke up and he was already gone. I stayed crying in his bed, alone.

In the afternoon, to clear his mind of everything Cahrué had told him, he decided to get up and explore the village more closely. He dressed in the clothes the old woman had given him: a pair of pants and a shirt brought from the nearby parish 60 kilometers downriver, which did charity work by giving away bags of used clothes. He tried out the crutch that one of the village boys had carved for him, the same one who had arrived that afternoon to see how it worked.

"I like it a lot," Maximiliano told him, and the boy jumped around him happily, telling everyone, as they left, that he had carved it himself.

So he walked through the village streets, accompanied by the boy, the only one who didn't look at him with fear or suspicion, or useless reverence. The women and men wore body paint. The boy explained what it meant. Married women had a series of dots on their foreheads, and parts of their bodies were tattooed with figures of trees and fish. Unmarried women wore their hair up and their bodies almost covered in white. The men's paintings were more varied, almost individual, and represented caste differences. Those from older families wore a lynx mask. The younger ones, of marriageable age, had their bodies painted a very dark blue, and the mask simulated the face of a caititú.

"What's that?" asked Maximiliano.

The boy pointed to a wild pig among a few others walking through the village looking for scraps. No one feared them; they were domesticated.

The significance of this animal in mating rituals was brutal to him, but the stark contrast between the paintings of the virgins and those of the young men, whom he almost always saw together at the doorways of the huts or walking near the river, was not only curious but sexually disturbing. The boy didn't need to tell him that those who had not yet reached puberty were obliged to remain naked until the age of change arrived. It didn't matter if it was cold or hot, whether girls or boys, those who survived were worthy of maturity.

What Cahrué had said was true. A culture like that either dies or persists. He couldn't adapt.

"I'm thirsty," he said.

The boy led him to a barrel next to a hut. He bent his head and saw his reflection in the water. It had been so long since he had looked in a mirror that for a moment he thought someone else was peering into the water with him. He was thin, his beard was frizzy, his hair dirty, and he had deep dark circles under his eyes. He looked up and saw an old man sitting at the door of the hut. It was Don Roberto, his blind eyes perhaps lost in distant thoughts beyond the bustle of the village.

He approached and said:

"Father..."

Don Roberto turned his head toward him. He was fine; he looked as if he had regained weight, freshly bathed, and smelling of a strange aroma. His eyelids were closed.

"Father..." he said again, placed a hand on the old man's head, and leaned down to kiss his forehead.

Then the old man opened his eyes.

They were two enormous bottomless oceans, watery abysses of dense darkness.

Maximiliano looked at the boy, anxious to see if he was seeing the same thing he was seeing. The boy was gone, no one was looking at them. As if they had suddenly deviated from normal time to settle into their own time.

"It's me, Father, it's Maximiliano, your son-in-law." The old man raised his hands and felt Maximilian's body. He frowned, perhaps surprised to feel so thin. He even touched the stump of his leg.

"They're transforming you," he said.

"I don't understand..."

"I've been watching them, son, and you're taking their form."

He didn't need to ask. That afternoon, he returned to his hut and began taking the skulls out of the bags.

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Twelve months passed, and he was finally dead. Hoisting a new winter. During all this time, Maximiliano, with Cahrué's help, dedicated himself to a meticulous dissection of the skulls. What he initially believed to be a quicker task took hours, then days, and finally weeks of nonstop work until he discovered what lay beneath each layer of soft tissue, each muscle, each ligament connecting bones, hiding the fragile porcelain of cartilage, the tiny veins that supplied the brain. Each bone was broken, at first clumsily, because Maximiliano's hands were unused to handling the instruments, not even the rudimentary surgical instruments Cahrué had fashioned from indigenous materials and some other metal ones stolen from the medical school or some hospital in the city.

Later, as the exploration became more thorough, the time lengthened, but the discoveries became much more abundant. They discovered structures they believed were not described in any anatomy textbook, but aware of this fallacy, they indulged in such a fantasy like two scientists who needed that incentive to continue. Because what Maximilian was looking for was already becoming uncertain: the anomaly causing the mystical hallucinations could be anywhere in the brain, in any nervous, bone, or vascular structure, or who knew what other type. Cancer cells, probably, but this idea didn't convince him. Cahrué had told him that the few trepanations he witnessed as a child, performed by elderly people, did not show the usual characteristics of tumors. If they were malignant tumors, the patients would not have lived as many years after the operation as they were known to have. However, in those six months they didn't find any similar structure in any skull. They had dissected some very old ones, which Cahrué knew belonged to the time of the ancient healers. They even found two with trepanations made: they clearly saw the square hole in the parietal bone of one and in the occipital bone of another. The bone cap was consolidated with the rest, but the signs of the operation were clearly visible. This meant that the patients had survived for many years and were healthy when they died.

"Perhaps we should call the spirits that invaded them malignant, and not the tumors," said Maximilian, his hands covered in mud and the vague remains of ancient dead flesh. He looked tired. He worked on the floor of the hut, legs crossed, and the stump prevented him from maintaining his balance even sitting that way.

Cahrué looked at him strangely.

"I thought you were the one eager to search for the scientific causes of these diseases."

"That's true, my friend, but so much time has passed, and I'm tired of seeing nothing but dirty bones. The truth is, we won't go any further down this path." They continued working, however. Every night, the moon reminded him of his unwavering stubbornness; it was the nourishment that seemed to be lost on each sunny day of the new spring, with the small daily tragedies of the indigenous people. He had learned to dress like them, wearing shorts and bare-chested, he learned to savor the food prepared for him by the old woman, who died one winter day, being replaced by a much younger woman, one of Cahrué's many sisters. That night, one of the last winter, she crawled into the cot under the blankets, very close to him, and taught him to enjoy sex as if it were just another routine, like walking, like eating, like breathing. It was, now, an act he didn't attach much importance to; it was simply a satisfied need. He was happy in those moments because he forgot everything else. A pleasant form of forgetting, but without its irreversibility, without the pain or tragedy. He accompanied Cahrué on his doctor's visits to the huts. When people saw them arriving together, they bowed, and the children stepped aside. Maximilian's hair grew long and dark, his beard thick but short, his body stronger and weather-beaten. He carried his tibia bone in his right hand to walk with, a sign of distinction that condescended to the superstition of the natives. He could have used any other wooden cane, but it wouldn't have been the same. The others expected to see him walking with the bone he had cut himself, and he was proud of the expression he saw in theirs: unease, fear, adoration.

It could be said that now he could consider himself a little god. If he had lost his own, why not create one in his own image and likeness? Why invent one or why look for it in another being, thing, or entity? One is one's own god, so why shouldn't he be one for others? If this served them well to live in peace, as if an eternally just and infallible judge, but also human enough to understand them, was always within reach of their hands. This was one of the shortcomings of the ancient creator God: his lack of presence, his remoteness, his muteness, his deafness. If he had ever been young, if he had ever been human, he had ceased to be so long before the creation of the world. It was not surprising, then, that his death had occurred before any man could recreate him with his intelligence. Like someone who died before being born. As if, when the world was created and the first man sought the rational fabric of everything that surrounded him, even the slightest trace of his existence had already disappeared. Therefore, God had to be reinvented as an idea that would never fully coalesce into congruence or plausibility. He had been born in an imperfect mind, the mind of a child ready to play, without limits, with all of Creation.

And on one of those visits, they entered the hut of a fifty-year-old man who was lying on the ground. The family said he refused to lie down on the cot because he feared the wrath of the gods. Cahrué leaned over him and said something to him in his language. Maximilian had also learned some of this language, and understood that he was asking him what he feared the gods would do to him. The man spoke into Cahrué's ear. He smiled at Maximilian, but turned his serious gaze back to the man. He patted him on the back and made him stand up. He asked the woman who lived with him if that was the only thing she had noticed. She began to speak so quickly

that Maximilian could no longer understand anything. She gesticulated frantically, and one of her daughters tried to restrain her while another supported her protests. Cahrué stopped her with a gesture of his hand, then they remembered whose presence they were in, and they fell silent, staring at the ground.

"She says her husband has been acting strangely for the last month. He lies on the floor and won't eat meat." He goes out to see the moon and prays to it and speaks to it every night in an unknown language. He says the gods have predicted a great drought this summer, and he tries to appease their anger.

"I don't see anything too strange considering the beliefs of your people, Cahrué."

"Nor do I. But if the woman finds it strange, that's as it should be. I've been told he wasn't a very religious man before he started behaving like this. I'll give him some spices and we'll come back in a few days."

He explained to the woman and daughters how to give him the medicine, a mixture obtained from the mortar after pounding some sedative herbs. Then they went out. Night had fallen earlier than expected. The sky was overcast, and a strong wind whipped the village paths. It couldn't have been later than five in the afternoon, but it was dark. The clouds were stormy, and it was only very difficult to make out a dark pink halo behind them.

"Maybe it's an eclipse," said Cahrué, standing in the middle of the street, looking at the sky.

"Maybe so, my friend, but I remember that a comet was predicted to pass through some years ago. I've been disconnected from the world for a long time, but this reminds me of that news. This must be the time, then."

"And what will it do to us?"

"They said a few earthquakes, a few floods here and there. Nothing that doesn't happen every day without the need for a comet. Others have predicted the end of time."

"You're telling me this after seeing this man with his crazy ideas about gods and drought? Are you converting to our religion?"

Cahrué's expression was sarcastic: if white men had instilled Western culture in him and taken away beliefs that were now impossible for him to recover, it was pathetic that a white man would now renounce science.

"I'm trying to reconcile both ideas..."

"You already told him, sir, that the coexistence of two opposing ideas is not possible. Either that man in there is right, or we are right out here. Gods or comets."

"Why choose?!"

"Because, if I'm not mistaken by what I've read, a comet is made of simple rock, and the gods are composed of ethereal substances."

"Then the gods are more complex, and therefore more logically true."

"Rock can be very complex; have you seen it under a microscope? Perhaps the substance of the gods can also be mere smoke, which is often the best way to simulate figures."

"I don't understand, Cahrué. You're asking me to choose because you think that as cultured men we have a preconceived idea that we must defend, yet you question the foundations of all beliefs."

"That's what you've taught me, sir." Your mother and father gave me the rules of reason and the instrument of logic. I adore the anatomy of bodies, whatever they may be. You, on the other hand, are searching with the instruments of reason, and in the cold edifices of anatomy, for the ethereal substance. of the gods.

Maximilian stared at him, fascinated. In that dark, seemingly insipid face, he had found a vaster intelligence than in any of the priests at the Cádiz seminary.

"So you think, Cahrué, that I'm looking for smoke, perhaps?"

"I think you're looking for the wrong element in the wrong place, be it smoke or rock."

That night, the storm broke. From the afternoon, the men and women were preparing, shoring up the huts, covering the doors and windows with boards. They fenced in and tied up the goats, securing everything that could fly away or fall with ropes. But before it was over, it began to rain heavily. It was the first storm Maximilian had experienced there. Normally, the climate was humid and the rains were frequent, but he had never seen such wind. Don Roberto and Cahrué, along with the girl who served them, remained locked inside, protecting the flimsy shutters with their own arms for most of the night. The old man sat up in bed, still blind, with eyes so dark they increasingly feared the natives. The girl trembled, covered up to her head with blankets.

At dawn, the wind died down, but it continued to rain. They went outside to see almost the entire village destroyed by the wind from the flooded river and pushed up to the very doors. There were carcasses of goats hanged by the ropes with which they had been secured. Some dogs paddled beside the canoes that had already left to bring food to the isolated families. It continued to rain all day, and the next, and for seven full days. The morning that dawned without rain, everything was the same and worse: there was no food, nothing but water and branches and floating corpses. Maximilian's hut was on a high spot, so they were able to stay there. Many canoes came to bring sick people. Cahrué would place them inside and try their best to heal them. Even Don Roberto helped by rolling cloth or boiling water over a fire.

On the eighth day after the storm, in the afternoon, it began to rain again, intermittently at first, which gave everyone false hope. Then, a drizzle, more or less heavy but constant, continued, and never stopped. That afternoon, when the rain started again, they brought the sick man who had sparked that argument that had first confronted their ideas. The family brought him in the canoe and left him at the door of the hut, letting Cahrué lift him up and drag him inside. He wasn't hurt, but dazed, lost in his own fantasies of illness.

"I can't let him stay," Cahrué had said. But they wouldn't listen. They threw the body away and walked away. He dragged him inside and looked at the others. The sick man, meanwhile, was delirious in his own language. Cahrué lifted him up, dropped him in the middle of the hut, and tried to get him to stand, but seeing that the other man was letting himself fall, he hit him.

"Wake up, drunk!"

But he knew he wasn't drunk. It was the herbs he had prescribed, and the family had given him in much larger doses to keep him calm.

"What's he saying?" Don Roberto asked, sensing the girl's unease. She had moved away when she saw him enter, and she was trembling as much, if not more, than during the storm.

Cahrué was very nervous. Maximiliano realized that the situation in the hut was getting almost as out of control as the river outside.

"He's talking about the drought. He says the drought will last as long as the beast is among us."

Maximiliano thought of the Book of Revelations. He had said something similar long before. He stood still, lost in thought, looking at the sad scene of the hut slowly darkening, Cahrué at the foot of the fallen sick man, the girl gripped by terror, and Don Roberto, serene in the darkness that protected him from all ghosts because it was his own ghost. He then approached Cahrué and whispered in his ear:

"You must help me open his head; I'm absolutely sure we'll find what we're looking for."

Cahrué stepped back and told him he was crazy.

Maximiliano held his head in his hands. He was stronger, taller than Cahrué.

"If you don't want me to kill the girl."

The Indian then looked at him in a new way. His usual slowness returned to guide him, because the fear provoked by Maximiliano's gaze was perhaps greater than the rain, the flood, the famine, or the disease. All these plagues came after that sight in the white man's eyes. Still, he wasn't willing to believe her, and he broke away from Maximilian's hands.

"I see my parents taught you too much, and you've lost everything your ancestors passed on to you. Look closely, and learn again." He went to

where the girl was, grabbed her by the arm. Without giving the Indian time to intervene, he made her jump over the sick people lying there. On the ground, he threw her forcefully against the adobe wall. Cahrué ran to see her. Her skull was caved in over her forehead, and she was bleeding.

"There's nothing that interests me about her; we must trepan him," Maximiliano said, pointing at the man. "You're a doctor, Cahrué. I'm offering to find the cause of the illness, because of evil. Don't look for spirits if you don't believe in them, but I'm still looking for what's left of my God."

He knew he had convinced the Indian not for any practical or dialectical reason, but for something much more personal, which, in the end, was the only thing that would truly convince him to do the opposite of what he thought or felt. He knew Cahrué was seeing in Maximiliano's features the features of Uncle José. And he could no longer fight that.

That same day, Cahrué began preparing an anesthetic. He had had almost all his things brought from his home when they settled into Maximilian's hut before the rains, so all he had to do was search among his many jars and boxes for the one containing the leaves of the plant he needed for this occasion. He placed some in a small mortar and began to pound them into a paste, which he mixed with water.

The man had been tied to one of the cots. He moved and screamed, but then calmed down. He seemed to know what they were going to do to him, but it had been a long time since such operations had been performed in the village. Cahrué approached with the mixture and gave it to him to drink. The man did so and began to doze off. Then, Cahrué began to shave his head of gray hair, which was already thinning. He made a mark with charcoal above his left temple. Maximilian asked why he would make the incision there.

"Because it is said that the speech center is on this side of the brain." I think it's a problem of discordance between what he means and what he says. Anyway, sir, we're on almost virgin territory for me too, and you've seen nothing but dead heads. This isn't the same as in a book. There will be blood, lots of it, and brain matter we must take care of.

"I know, my friend."

Cahrué washed his hands and told him to do the same. Then he prepared the entire array of instruments he needed on the bed: stylets, small scalpels made from bone, tweezers stolen from the city's hospitals, a saw, and a chisel.

"I need the fire to always be burning, and a hot brand near me."

Maximiliano took care of that, and then Cahrué began cutting the skin over the mark. The bleeding was controlled with tweezers heated over the brand. A smell of burning flesh filled the place, and the bleeding stopped. He scraped the skin over the bone until he reached it, and once he had a clean surface almost twenty centimeters in diameter, he prepared to begin the trepanation. He placed a chisel on the marked lines and, with a

hammer, began to tap slowly and carefully. A delicate path was formed, and only two or three blows were enough to penetrate it. He did the same at various points along the entire mark; then he only needed to connect these points with new blows, and the bone cap began to loosen. He plunged a blunt stylet under one of the edges and lifted it. Beneath it was a pinkish, fibrous membrane crisscrossed with very fine veins.

"It's the meninges, isn't it?" Maximilian asked.

Cahrué nodded and, with a scalpel, began to cut the tissue. The bleeding stopped as the small veins were severed. Maximilian took care of that.

Outside, it was getting dark. The murmur of the stream was clear, the splashing of people, and the murmurs that were slowly fading away. The rain continued, incessantly, on the roof, the flooded surroundings, the jungle. Inside, the girl with her battered head looked from a corner, dozing, her face stained with dried blood. Don Roberto had lain down on his cot, his eyes open, but undoubtedly listening to what they were saying. The other patients were on the floor, each in their own cloth blanket, oblivious to anything other than their own grief and illness. Cahrué lifted the meninx and revealed the mass of the brain. It was barely bleeding, and Maximiliano saw how a small throb shook that noble tissue. He thought of the moon, which must be rising in the sky of the new, growing night, and that brain was like the moon, imperfectly rounded, full of craters or paths, of deep, unexplored and dangerous depths. Yes, without a doubt, he would find God there, and this thought filled him with a new hope that manifested itself in his face, his hands, and his voice as well.

"I want to be the surgeon now," he said.

Cahrué looked at him for a moment, immediately guessing everything that was going through Maximilian's mind: there was no alternative but to let him do whatever he wanted. Everyone in that hut was under his dominion, not even he, with all his knowledge, was able to shake off the influence exerted by that white man with his latent or manifest anger. There was the man with his severed leg, that gaze that came from centuries of abysmal thoughts, and that face so similar to that of the man he thought he adored in his adolescence, and who one day was gone forever. He saw him use the tweezers as if he had been doing the job all his life, observed those hands so similar to José Menéndez Iribarne's, with almost the same furrows of bluish veins on the slightly hairy back, the long fingers. He contemplated the expression on Maximiliano's face: it showed fascination and delight. He delicately explored the brain mass, separating the convolutions until he reached the depth. Cahrué helped him, cleaning the blood and keeping the tissues separate, wondering what he was looking for. Then he said to himself that every surgical operation is, in principle, an exploration, and that every exploration is an uncertain search: we will know what we are looking for when we find it. He wondered if the god of the white men, about whom he knew so much, to whom he had prayed so much out of obligation, was that search for the uncertain: the blind search for a blind being, perhaps completely disabled, locked somewhere inside our own skull. Like an abandoned child, an unborn child, perhaps an undeveloped

fetus encysted in that almost inaccessible place where it has hidden itself. Perhaps a monster or a beast, the size of an ant but with all the power of God's name.

"I think this bone is the sphenoid," Maximilian said, pointing with the tip of the stiletto.

Cahrué looked and affirmed, even though he wasn't sure.

"Even if it is, what are you looking for?"

"Look carefully, Cahrué. Don't you see this scab over the bone?" What does it remind you of?

The Indian looked at him in astonishment.

"A fracture... Several years ago, this man got lost in the river because his canoe capsized in the current. He was lost for a few hours and was found on a rock on a beach several kilometers from the village. It was so many years ago, very shortly after his parents left. After that, he was always completely normal."

"Until now, coinciding with the beginning of the rains..."

"But he predicted droughts..."

"That's the heart of the problem, Cahrué. Perhaps this scab has grown so much that it's somehow disrupting brain connections."

The Indian was amazed at Maximiliano's intelligence. Because it wasn't just his ability to retain everything he'd read over the years, but to have found a way to amalgamate it all into a form of logical thought. Without medical experience, they theoretically knew more than he did. But then he realized there was something else: an intuitive element, perhaps imagination, perhaps even a certain amount of madness. Thinking about everything that had happened since he arrived, it didn't seem strange to him to think that this element was being progressively and irreversibly unleashed.

Maximiliano began to scrape the crust that had formed on the bone. Cahrué showed him how to do it with the help of the blunt stilettos. The splinters gradually lifted, and the original shape of the bone appeared underneath. The Indian recommended that he be careful with the nerves and blood vessels. The optic nerve was very close. When he finished, he cleaned them with water and ran a fingertip over the bone, smooth as a freshly polished board.

"It's done, my friend," Maximiliano said, and smiled. His eyes shone, discovering something he had longed for for a long time. He didn't say anything yet, but he knew what he had to do with Don Roberto. They returned the brain mass to its space above the bone, sewed the meninges, and covered the bone cap. They secured it with bandages that would be changed until it healed. The man remained in bed and woke up the next morning, very early, before the sun had even risen above the flood.

"Rains!" he said as loudly as he could. "Great rains will flood the world!"

Only Maximiliano heard him, for he had barely slept.

The small, disturbed god in that man had not disappeared, but now he spoke with the irrefutable beauty of logic.

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He knew, then, what to do with Don Roberto. He would perform the operation himself, whether Cahrué wanted to help him or not. And he sensed that the Indian would do it, this time, not because he felt threatened, but out of a thirst for knowledge. Maximilian thought that for that village he had become like a savior, mobilizing and renewing people's beliefs, whatever they were, and for Cahrué it had consisted of a renewing, almost revolutionary spirit. But this social vision of his own role since he arrived didn't quite match what others saw.

The village remained flooded, and the rains alternated Every two days. They would last the entire season, and they had to be content that the river's flow didn't rise any further. As long as the rains were moderate and the river allowed to recede slowly, it was enough to survive. The waters around the hut didn't recede, and every day the canoes arrived and brought or took away the sick, or the dead. The man who had undergone the trepanation lay in bed, speaking normally, and said he wanted to leave. But when he looked out the door, he appreciated the warm, dry atmosphere inside and decided to complain a little to show that he was still convalescing. Cahrué wanted to keep an eye on his wound anyway, but both he and Maximiliano considered the operation a success.

"Tomorrow we will operate on Don Roberto."

Cahrué looked at him suspiciously while he treated his sister's wound, which didn't seem to improve. The crack in her head didn't stop bleeding, staining the cloths every day. He wasn't hungry and spent almost the entire day sleeping.

"We should treat her; I'm sure she'll get worse."

"First my father-in-law, then her. I'll help him operate on her myself; it's the least I can do," he concluded sarcastically.

"What is he talking about?" Cahuirué thought. That night, making sure Maximiliano was asleep, he took out of his things the Bible the priest had given him before his trip to the city to study. He searched everywhere in that book for something that would explain what was on the mind of the white man, something that would explain that particular god they talked so much about, for the sake of which they so debased the world, filling it with churches and cathedrals, dogmas and laws of blood and punishment. The words that explained that god would, therefore, explain the white man himself. It would be easier, then, to understand them, predict them, justify them, at least, even if it would do nothing to remove their predatory influence on the world. The evil was already done, the poison had been

sown and was growing in every field and every wasteland, in every soul of his people. But all those words were incomprehensible to him. He understood them perfectly, but they spoke of a world he couldn't fully imagine: deserts, politics, words that, out of extreme compassion, became merciless universal punishments. The logic they boasted about shone with its incongruity.

In the morning, Maximilian found him asleep with the Bible open in his hands. Without waking him, he picked it up and began to leaf through it. It had been a long time since he had done so. On the first page was the now almost illegible signature of its owner, a certain Jorge de las Casas, perhaps the priest mentioned in Uncle José's notebooks. That's what he still called him: Uncle, he would never be anything more than that to him. It was curious how little he had thought about it since reading the manuscripts. All he had done, upon learning of his past, was go to the field of the dead and then cut off his own broken leg. Was that a way of cutting himself off from his past? Obviously, but the idea seemed too trite to be worthy of him. That's why he avoided the thoughts that now came to him, treacherous, crawling like common garden slugs that believed themselves to be intelligent snakes from lost paradises. He threw the book onto the embers. He saw the covers stain with a soot barely blacker than his own color. That way, it would never burn. He knelt by the fire and removed the book. The hot covers burned his hands for a moment, but he endured the discomfort. He got up and hid the book, along with the silver cross—both his own and the one he found next to the notebooks—under the bed. He grabbed the notebooks and carried them to the fire. The old, wrinkled, dry paper caught fire easily, but he had the satisfaction of watching the pages burn one by one, how Uncle José's handwriting was consumed just as his dead body had been consumed in the fire at the mansion in Cádiz. What he hadn't seen because he had fled before seeing it realized, he was now seeing for the first time. The smell of burning flesh lingered inside the hut, tainted with human odors perpetuated by the intense humidity.

He felt a hand placed on his left shoulder. Cahrué watched what he was doing.

"Let's do whatever you want with the old man," he said. "I'll treat my sister tonight."

They hadn't even eaten anything when the anesthetic herb was prepared. They had washed Don Roberto and laid him naked on the cot where the other man had been operated on. The cloths were clean, the fire burned with fresh fuel and lit almost the entire hut. The surgical tools had been thoroughly cleaned. The old man's thinning hair was shaved. As he fell asleep, Maximilian stroked his head like a child, speaking of Elsa, promising him that he would soon see his daughter again. The old man smiled at him. He laughed for a moment with his thin lips surrounded by his long white beard. His eyes had been lifeless for a long time, dark abysses that closed when his eyelids fell asleep. Who knows where they would delve into, into what depths the worlds that inhabited that mind that discreet mouth had decided to keep silent would be born? Worlds that Maximiliano was willing to open now, to free them, so that Don Roberto

would finally be free of them and could be the man and father Elsa longed for him to be again.

This time, Maximiliano wanted to do everything alone. He only allowed the Indian to help him clean the wound, pass him utensils, or do anything else he couldn't do for himself. He made the incision on the left temple, since the symptoms in the eye had begun on that side. He reached the bone and began the trepanation, just as he had seen Cahrué do. The old man's bony surface was thinner, and he feared injuring the deeper tissue. He acted carefully, lifting the bone cap. Beneath it, he found the meninx and palpated it. It felt hardened and calloused. There was something deeper pushing the membrane outward, now free from the pressure of the bone.

Cahrué gave him the scalpel, and he delicately pierced the meninx. A stream of thick, white liquid began to flow rapidly, falling down the old man's head onto the bed. Maximiliano's fingers became stained, and the first thing he tried to do was stop the flow, but Cahrué told him to let it out. Maximiliano then opened the orifice further by inserting a finger into the cavity. The liquid continued to flow for a long time, becoming scarcer each time, then more stained with blood.

"He's had an infection for a long time, that's obvious," Cahrué said.

"But he should have had a fever..."

"If the infection were the cause of his blindness, yes, he would have died by now."

"So...?"

"Open it wider and you'll see..."

Maximilian looked at him, sensing what he was trying to imply.

He opened the meninx as far as the trepanation would allow. The brain mass crumbled at the touch. He cleaned the area with plenty of water, and the pieces of tissue disappeared like pieces of dreams, pieces of life and intelligence forever gone. Memories, perhaps, pieces of the world forever dead.

Deeper, he found an almost stony mass of white and grayish tissue.

"That's what I thought," Cahrué said. "A giant tumor."

"The doctors thought it had invaded the brain and that's why they couldn't remove it."

"Sir, the tumor is the brain itself, or at least part of it. If we remove everything, it will remain alive, perhaps, but like a vegetable."

"Anyway, it will die if we leave it like that."

"Then you decide." Bring his daughter a vegetable to take care of for the rest of her life, or a corpse.

Maximiliano glared at him with hatred. How dare he speak to him like that about the only two people he had ever come to love? What did the Indian

know of his life before and after that boat trip? Not even with all his imagination could he come close to deducing it. As a response, he continued working. He tried to distinguish, based on what he had seen and touched, the hardened or atrophied tissues, those that still received blood from those that did not. He cut away what seemed dead to him, but soon he came to the surface of a bone at the base of the skull, near the eye. Then he knew it was the same one he had seen many times in corpses, the same one that had caught his attention when studying the anatomy books in Uncle José's library. The sphenoid bone, with its winged structure and its holes like short tunnels through which the nerves and blood vessels for the eye ran. In the man with the delusions of rain and drought, he had found a fracture; in old Roberto, he found that almost the entire left surface was riddled, almost perforated, by the mass of the tumor that had developed over it. The sphenoid foramen was much larger than usual; it could hardly be called a hole, but rather a free space that had been inhabited until then by the tumor.

Maximilian saw the atrophied nerves, the collapsed arteries and veins, the bone shattered into splinters of a purulent consistency. The fat behind the eye protruded into the cranial cavity and was now nothing more than infectious tissue. He lifted the brain a little further and found small living beings, white larvae moving in a place that until then had been favorable to them. And Maximilian knew that these were representations of demons, incarnations of the demons who had dismantled God's skeleton, throwing the remains into the sea. What he had seen in Don Roberto's gaze, what Brother Aurelio had seen, what he glimpsed in the eyes of the captain's wife, had been that: simply the openness and theThe liberation of the demons by destroying the structure that God had designed as His supreme creation. Something so great that it could never surpass: man and his body. Because the soul is spirit, and if God is spirit, all He had done was give part of His soul to a biological object that had not existed before. If the spirit is energy, then with it God had created man, like an explosion, like an effervescence, like the putrefaction from which worms are born.

The biological body was, then, the terrain of war between God and the demons.

To conquer the body was to conquer God.

Therefore, he, Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne, now called Méndez Iribarne due to the compassionate carelessness of a simple customs employee, had to exterminate the demons.

He grabbed the scalpel and penetrated the old man's brain. The larvae continued to emerge, carried by the torrent of blood that now gushed forth, and which would have no end. Because Maximilian knew it was all over. That old Roberto had been taken over by the forces of evil, that his body was a breeding ground for demons, ready to take over the world at any moment.

Cahrué tried to stop the bleeding, but when he saw Maximilian move his hands away and keep them open, he realized he was offering the old man's body as a sacrificial offering. He had attended the masses the priest gave

once a month in the village, and that position of the officiant before the Holy Eucharist was the one Maximilian had at that moment. His hands were open at his sides, raised just a little above his head. His gaze was ecstatic and pious, sad, reflective, and at the same time completely dominated, first focused on the body of the sacrifice, then raised to God, like the portraits of Christ in Renaissance paintings. The old man's body bled to death on the cot, half his head split open and covered with blood-soaked rags.

Maximilian fetched a cloth and covered the body. Then he sank to the ground, sobbing silently, his face in his hands, swaying to the beat of music only he could hear. Perhaps the Qui Tollis from a Mozart mass.

The anguished song of the water outside.

That night, Cahrué operated on his sister. He didn't ask Maximilian to help him, nor did Maximilian offer his help, since he hadn't moved from his spot next to the dead old man. No more than an hour later, the girl had also died, and Cahrué stood beside him. Maximilian saw her bare feet on the muddy floor of the hut. He raised his gaze to her eyes and saw the Indian's gaze. "Everything we touch dies," he said. "We should kill ourselves."

Maximiliano stood up with difficulty. His one leg hurt a lot, but he made the effort to honor Cahrué, speaking to him face to face.

"You're going to operate on me now. I have many demons to remove from within my body. My temple is rotting in life because of them. Look over there..." he said, pointing to the window.

It had been dark for a long time, and a full moon of splendor seemed to advance over the jungle.

"What?!" the Indian asked angrily.

"Don't you see how the moon is tilting toward us? The moon is made of bone, my friend, an enormous bone the size of the soul of God. It has been pierced for a long time, shattering into splinters that fall into the sea. I've seen it, I assure you, even here I saw the bones falling into the wide Paraná River, to be swept away by its terrible current toward the ocean." There the palaces of the next kingdom are built.

Cahrué observed him carefully, her brow furrowed, her hands trembling. Maximilian knew what he was thinking, but he waited patiently for him to speak, able to withstand the full torrent of fury he sensed. However, he was not prepared to hear what he said.

"I will do it, sir. I will operate on you and remove that moon of derision that inhabits your mind."

Then he stared into the center of your pupils.

"Your eyes are two stones, sir. Two bones petrified as long ago as the fall of the most beautiful angel in heaven."

Maximilian got up the next morning long after dawn. The bustle of the village surprised him. The flood had driven almost everyone away, and all that had been heard for many weeks was the sound of the stream and the rain. But this morning, songs and shouts of merriment could be heard. The sound of the water was joyful and free from the gloom of the previous days. This time, a few still timid rays of sunlight penetrated the window, peeking through the clouds that were slowly beginning to crack. The rain had stopped, but it would be a long time before the waters left the village and the river returned to its usual level.

The man who had predicted the drought in the midst of the flood approached the door and went out. His family was waiting for him. in a canoe, and he climbed into it and waved to the inhabitants of the hut, like a child. He was cured of his hallucinations, perhaps. But a moment later, he stood up in the middle of the canoe, making it rock with its occupants inside, and shouted to the only one watching him leave:

"Drought, drought!" he said in Spanish, and his family laughed so loudly that they almost all fell into the water. But the canoe held, and they continued their return home.

Maximilian turned around and saw Cahrué carrying his sister's body.

"She was pregnant," he said.

Maximilian held him by one arm, because the other was still stretching out, perhaps taking her to the field of the dead.

"How do you know?!"

"When she died last night, her body expelled a very small embryo."

"What did she do with it?"

What did he do with my son? He would have liked to ask in a world other than this one, in a moment other than this one, with a feeling other than the one that now made him nauseous.

"I threw him into the fire, sir. That's what we do with soulless children."

Then he walked along the wooden path they had built like a bridge. When the path ended, Cahrué sank into the water up to his knees and continued walking to the field of the dead, also flooded. What would he do there? Maximilian wondered, his mind consumed by the desire to enter the hut and dig among the embers. He wouldn't, surely not. Who knew if it was true, after all, and if it had been, a soul still survives the fire, especially unbaptized souls. They survive and are left wandering in limbo, forever lost and suffering. Would he let that happen to his son? He tried to push the thought out of his mind; Cahrué had most likely lied out of spite. But he knew the Indian wasn't capable of lying about such a thing.

He entered the hut and went straight to the extinguished fire. He stirred the cold, extinguished embers and felt nothing but ash between his fingers. But aren't bodies transformed into that when they burn? Such ash could be

anything conceivable by the human mind: a log, a dead child, or the bones of the crucified god himself.

He thought of Elsa, of how he would never see her again, how he would never bear her a child, nor she him. Then he felt the worms in his mind stirring in his bed, and he called out Cahrué's name, urging her to return immediately and operate on him. He needed to get rid of that sound, that tickling, that smell emanating from himself. If he didn't do it soon, he would throw himself into the river to drown. But what would that accomplish, except drive the worms to a more favorable environment for their proliferation? He had to remove the evil from the body, keep everything dry so nothing would grow. So the worms would die in the sun, and remove the demons from the dominion of water, from the dominion of blood.

He saw Cahrué coming from the flooded area. He arrived alone, walking through the water, and when he stepped onto the raised path, the waters rose as well, and it was like watching him walk on water. Maximiliano felt that the moment had finally arrived. He saw Christ walking on the water, that imitative Christ who debased the true one.

Cahrué came to him. Maximiliano approached his face, kissed him on one cheek, then the other, and finally on the mouth.

"I surrender my body to God, Cahrué."

By noon, the Indian had already opened Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne's skull. But he was asleep, wandering in the soft realms of induced sleep. And the legs of sleep were the legs of a thousand spiders that lifted his body in the air and carried him from station to station on Calvary. He felt Cahrué's scalpel-like nails, who this time had the face of a Roman centurion. The soldier's fingers entered his head, exploring, removing useless debris, piercing the bones until they reached the wings of the sphenoid bone. And there, seated, was the great orifice that led from the recesses of the mind to the orbital tunnel of the eyes. A tunnel that led from time to time, accumulating visions, memories, everything seen in that portion of the skull preserved like a forgotten corner of an old house, built by a sick architect. An architect who died before the house was even finished. Everything in the house has been left unfinished: the doors open, the windows without shutters, the floors without tiles, the walls unpainted, the living rooms cold, the kitchen sterile, the bathrooms without drains, the rooms sharp with dampness and sadness. On the surface of the bone, Maximiliano tries to take flight, but the wings of the sphenoid are not wings, but the skeletons of a large dead bird, stuffed and installed in a museum.

The museum is the house.

The house is its skull.

Its skull is a basement.

He sees how Cahrué raises a hand, and in his hand is a large pStone crumbles the useless building. The demolition has begun, to make way for a

vast open space where a plaza will be created within the enormous city of the world. A plaza made of concrete, without grass, without trees, without flowers. Only floors and rides made of cement. A city for children who have learned nothing but the game of yes and no. The games of the machine, the smell of oil, the aroma of petroleum, the smell of gunpowder. The aroma of the extermination camps. The scent of wood pierced by a nail, of wood burned at the stake, the vapor emanating from the electric chair.

Maximilian travels back in time, because his eyes now see everything they have ever seen. He is a man, he knows it. He has never been more than a man, nor less than one. Witness to the world, judge and part of the world. In his hands he sees the silver cross torn from a dead body, more than twenty years before. He sees the legacy of pain and madness, of pure sadness crystallized in fragile gestures worn by time.

He sees the fire. He sees the water.

And the blood that fuels it spills out, carrying away torrents of corpses.

He sees the beast rising above the sacred temple of his skull, breaking its boundaries after many months, perhaps forty-two months, I couldn't say for sure. The beast expanding and emerging from his head, seeking to feed, since it can no longer dwell there. It flees, taking everything in its path. What it leaves behind are spoils and heresies, dried-up things defying the vitality of gods and kings. Fleeing toward the water to grow, to satiate itself, to build its dominion.

The beast has gone and left him alone, empty. His skull is a sounding board with an imperfect echo, producing a deformed response.

And in the middle of nowhere, he stands, like the dry embryo of a dead god.

Cahrué closed the skull, placed the bone cap, and a bandage around the head. He checked to make sure Maximiliano was breathing normally. He covered him with a blanket, wrapped him up, and let him sleep. He would probably wake up before nightfall. By then, he would have rested enough to start a new day. There was much to do.

He searched through Maximiliano's belongings. He found the last address he had for Elsa. He would do what Maximiliano asked before taking the sedative: he would take him, dead or alive, back to Buenos Aires, find his wife, and leave him with her. Cahrué agreed because he saw it as a good opportunity to escape the town. Once, long ago, he had hoped a white man, very similar to this one next to him, would take him to the city. Then he went alone, it's true, but what happened that time was like an outstanding debt the white man owed him. Now he could fulfill it. This time he would return to Buenos Aires not as an Indian any white man could humiliate, but as the companion of one of them. Upon disembarking the riverboat, he would be the personal physician of a foreigner from the motherland who had decided to settle in the city.

Maximiliano woke up, trying to raise a hand, but couldn't. Cahrué sat him down on the cot and gave him a drink; she even had to pry his lips open.

Only the reflex functions would continue to function in Maximiliano. From now on, he would be the doctor, the nurse, the servant of a body that thought, heard, and felt, but that saw nothing but complete darkness, and he couldn't move any part of it except in his imagination. It wouldn't be long before he believed those movements were real, and he would mistake his desires for his achievements. He wasn't even allowed to speak; he was only allowed to make the sound of labored or calm breathing. His heart functioned normally. His stomach would continue to work tirelessly. His brain was half of what it once was, but it was enough for him from now on.

In the morning, he dressed Maximiliano. He allowed himself to be moved, and there was even a certain watery shine in his eyes as Cahrué moved him. Everything was ready to leave for the pier, where the boat would arrive at noon to take them to Buenos Aires.

Cahrué dressed in pants and a shirt. "Where did you get them?" Maximiliano seemed to ask with his eyes. And as if Cahrué had heard him, he replied:

"They belong to your family, sir. Clothes your father and uncle left me. These belong to Don Manuel."

Then Maximiliano tried to look down at his own clothes, but he couldn't reach them because he couldn't move his head. Cahrué said to him:

"I dressed you in things that belonged to Don José," he said, without a smile, but his thick lips seemed to thin into an indefinite grimace. He lifted Maximiliano and placed him on a canvas stretcher that two more men would carry to the dock. As he lifted him, he felt Maximiliano's breath on his neck, the wetness of tears, and the strength of the man's tense muscles. body. He laid him on the stretcher and called the others.

They caravanned along the path through the trees toward the dock. The same one he knew so well, and recognized this time from the smell of the jungle and the sound of the river's waters. The flood had receded quickly; the good weather had dried the puddles, and the earth had absorbed the water. The river returned to its course. And, curiously, the weather was too dry, so intense in its strange heat, that it seemed to be entering a period of drought.

Cahrué knew this, and that was why he was leaving too. His tribe would die, exterminated by hunger and neglect. He would flee to Buenos Aires, he who, with all his knowledge, could make his way through the white men. If they didn't let him through, he would force them. That was why he was carrying Maximilian, why the elegant clothes packed in his luggage.

And on the ship, they gave Maximiliano a wheelchair, and he spent the rest of the voyage there, on deck or in the small cabin. At night, they slept in the same bed, the only way to keep Maximiliano from falling, and also to change him if he got dirty. Cahrué would then clean him carefully, speaking to him like a child, dress him again, and put him to bed again.

Maximiliano watched the days go by from the deck, the waters of the river disappearing forever, and the landscape changing in exactly the opposite way he saw it the first time. Cities appeared, and the trees became scarce. The shores were filling up with docks and people, port cities.

One day they arrived at the port of Buenos Aires. It was afternoon, and the ship cruised through the enormous shipyards, the docks, until it stopped at one of them. The passengers began to disembark, but Cahrué wanted to wait for the dock to clear. When they both did, the Indian had dressed in his best clothes. A light brown suit, white shirt, a bow tie, and a hat. He walked with nobility, knowing he was strange to the people of Buenos Aires: a dark-skinned man with Indian-like features, but possessed of a very unusual poise. He didn't seem to be acting, but rather recalling the characteristics of the form and mannerisms he had once possessed. Watching him push his wheelchair through the streets of Buenos Aires, upright and strong, with his dark complexion but intense, virile, and dominant features, one would have said he didn't come from a race in decline, as he called himself, but from a race that was simply losing the battle for survival. And instead of letting himself die or be defeated, this member of that race was adapting to the new civilization. Maximiliano saw him dressed like that and thought what a contrast it was with what he had told him in the village. But he realized that it wasn't submission in Cahrué's case, but the purest and most exact action of a strategist. He could almost hear the sound of the internal machinery of the Indian's brain as they walked through the streets of a city somewhat different from the one he had known upon arrival. With barely three years or less of difference, he had grown. And where was Elsa, he wondered, as he intermittently gave in to the pain that plagued him in that chair, tied to the back so as not to fall forward, his one foot tied so that it wouldn't fall and trip the chair, his forearms tied so that they wouldn't fall on the wheels and hurt themselves between the spokes. He was a vegetable, he knew, but even a vegetable can grow. He would no longer grow, he would no longer be able to change except for the worse, to atrophy, to age, to suffer pain without being able to complain.

He could no longer harm anyone, nor could he love anyone else.

Where was Elsa in the midst of so many people? He had instructed Cahrué to begin searching when they arrived in the city. That's what the Indian had done, asking at customs. They went from boarding house to boarding house, following Elsa's name like a trail she had left over those few years. She must have suffered financial hardship, Maximiliano thought, in addition to the inevitable personal anguish due to the lack of news from him and Don Roberto.

Finally, a week after their arrival, when the few pesos they had were running out with the cost of a hotel room that Cahrué insisted on not leaving because it fit the image he was determined to present for their future, they were given an address in a slum on the banks of the Riachuelo.

Cahrué pushed his chair tirelessly, but he was sweating under his suit. Maximiliano was also well dressed in a linen suit that had belonged to Uncle José. He looked like a paralyzed millionaire being assisted by his personal physician of exotic origins. That's how people saw them on the street, followed by a few laughs, but mostly by admiring glances. The women whispered among themselves as they watched them pass. Cahrué made a brief dignified gesture with her hand. to the head, and they responded as if he were the personal secretary of an ambassador retired due to disability.

They reached the door of the tenement listed on the paper written in the clear, classical handwriting that Cahrué had learned to write. They clapped their hands to knock. They heard the sound of shoes descending a long metal staircase. Shortly after, the front door opened, and a woman with brown hair tied back at the nape of her neck appeared, her hands covered in flour and an apron over an old but elegant calico dress.

"Yes?" she asked, before seeing the man in the wheelchair. The appearance of the companion caught her attention first, and she had a hard time lowering her gaze to observe the sick man. Then her voice stopped, literally, in a stifled scream through her floured hand. A white stain covered her chin and lips.

"My God... Maximilian... it's you!" As soon as she said it, she hugged him, but the restraints and immobility confused her, and the strange companion's gaze intimidated her. She didn't know what to say, what to do. Cahrué helped her.

"My dear lady, I have the honor to introduce myself as your distinguished husband's personal physician. I am Dr. Mario Cabañas."

"But...but, doctor, what happened?"

"The savages, my dear lady," he said, with a look of sadness and resignation.

"But you..."

"They are of my race, madam. I was like them, but I had the honor of knowing your husband's parents, who gave me the necessary education."

Elsa wiped her tears with her hands, managing only to cover her face with lumps of flour. Cahrué, or Dr. Cabañas, which was the name he used when he studied medicine, approached her and offered her his handkerchief.

"Thank you," Elsa said, between sobs. A child who had appeared at the door a few seconds earlier hid between her legs. A freckled boy, no more than two years old.

She noticed and began to tremble. She looked alternately at the Indian and Maximilian. Then she stopped and looked at the disabled man who was now her husband.

"He's your son. I found out I was pregnant a few days after you left."

She stroked the child's head and said:

"Bruno, this is your father, the one I told you so much about."

The boy stared at the man in the wheelchair, approached the stump of his leg, and touched it. No one stopped him. He seemed to want to see if the leg was invisible, if there was some kind of magic in this strange man. When he understood, he began to cry and hid between Cahrué's legs. The smell of the fabric comforted him, the aroma that lingered through the years and climates.

The men left the hotel and settled into the boarding house, which they would soon leave in search of a larger place. From the following morning, which was Sunday, they were seen attending Mass very early every Holy Day. They left the tenement in their best clothes. First, Dr. Cabañas carried the sick man down on his shoulders and sat him in his chair at the foot of the stairs. Then Elsa came down wearing a black dress, the missal in her left hand and a rosary in her right. The boy was dressed in a dark suit with shorts and had his hair greased. The four of them went out onto the sidewalk and took up positions, which the doctor had determined for practicality, he said. In the center, the wheelchair, with the invalid neatly dressed and clean, silent as a doll who had to be protected from the sun and falls. Behind her, pushing the chair, was Elsa. At first, the doctor wanted to make that effort, but she flatly refused. In all other respects, she did and would continue to do as he advised, but the task of carrying her husband belonged exclusively to her. On the right walked the doctor, dignified as ever, attracting glances, aware and boastful of the desires and envy, of the astonishment, in short, he provoked. To the left of the chair walked Bruno, staring at the floor, ashamed as ever when he was forced to expose himself next to that sick man he didn't understand, who almost always smelled bad, except when he was bathed and perfumed before going out. That man, if he could be called that, whom he was forced to kiss every night before going to bed, and whose beard prickled him, whose guttural voice seemed like that of a wild animal.

The four of them then walked the few blocks to the church. And Elsa occasionally glanced at her husband's head as she pushed the chair. She saw the hair slowly covering a large scar that covered almost the entire top of his skull, with a raised surface as if the bone had been raised. Sometimes, while bathing him or putting him to bed, she thought she heard a noise like bones grating together, but she told herself it was impossible, that it was just her imagination. She had asked the doctor to tell her everything that had happened to them in the jungle, but he had told her that in time he would only make her think twice. It's been terrible for both of us, believe me, and you can see what it's been like for the gentleman," he said, lowering his gaze to the ground, as if hiding tears.

"Thank God, you had him to rescue him from those beasts."

Cahrué, who would never again utter this name, not even in his thoughts, replied:

"That's right, madam. We're more than brothers."

And Maximiliano blinked, fighting his desires like atrophied monsters to raise a hand and point to that night's moon. The enormous moon that was more beautiful than ever, because it was simply that, a stone satellite rotating until the end of time. There were no more demons in it, nor were there any gods surrendering their bones. The only God he had ever known was forever buried in his body, tied to the chair.